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THE LATE WIDOW TWANKEY



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By the same author

CELEBRATED SEQUELS
PASSIONATE KENSINGTON
A FOOTMAN FOR THE PEACOCK
EVENFIELD

THE LATE WIDOW TWANKEY

In Twenty-two Magnificent Scenes

Presented and Produced by

RACHEL FERGUSON



JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE
LONDON

To

*All those who believe that there is more in pantomimes than
meets the eye across the footlights*

It was Herbert Spencer, greatest of all rationalists, who pointed out that there is a foundation of fact for every legend and superstition of mankind.

From *By Daylight Only* of the *Not At Night* series,
edited by Christine Campbell Thomson.

And, may it not be equally true that these legends, and the characters of which they treat, persist, translated into terms of everyday life as we know it?

R. F.

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PART ONE

S C E N E I

I

ON the village green, which shared with the public-house the honour of being the centre of gossip for the community of Daisy-down village, a cluster of inhabitants were strolling arm-in-arm, unheeding of, or mayhap seeking to forget, the threat of world war. Several girls from The Home For Mental Deficients, of which the squire, Sir Richard Whittington, was a trustee, even graced the scene in sunbonnets of a uniform lilac and all were engaged in Community Singing as the news was extra bad that day.

It was, viewed from a considerable distance, a charming effect, assisted by sunlight, the leafy trees bordering the public-house, and the thatched cottages which mingled picturesquely with the laden apple-boughs, and the village lads and girls singing, blooming and smiling (for it was the lunch hour for those in work) dressed the scene to the admiration of all observers which included the landlord of The Pig in a Poke who leant out of an upper window waving a tankard to the rhythm of the chorus, while three rosy barmaids, elbows on sill, joined in from a lower one. They were pretty girls in the six-a-penny modern manner, and perhaps their faces were a thought too made up for such a place and hour and occupation, but of course all the girls are doing it.

What chorus they were singing only the villagers knew; for it is a fact that listen as you may, strain ears as you can, nobody to date ever has succeeded in catching more than six words of that particular ditty, nor of that of anything else which they performed in public and unison. Phonetically, and like The Ancient Mariner, the audience, if lucky, stopped one in three. Quite thirty per cent of the villagers the Vicar had tried out for the church choir, only to dismiss the lot as wholly incapable, though he admitted that they

could memorize the air of hymns and had a reasonably good idea of time. It wasn't, he sometimes told his wife, any question of unwillingness to oblige or come to choir practice: they were, indeed, prepared to sing at any opportunity, and did. The trouble was that they couldn't sing, and whether they were aware of the fact he didn't know and was too kindly to tell them.

His wife, shopping basket on wrist, regarded the scene with caustic amusement from the interior of the grocer, who rather capped the climax by bearing the surname of Prune. It was, she thought, that sort of village, or seemed to be, on the face of it . . . if a glass-cutter or dealer in lustres were to set up in the place his name would indubitably be Prism. Such an obvious form of clean, British fun.

And there they all were, at it again. The Vicar's wife had had three years of them by now, and knew, or thought she did, what to expect. (What *did* cook mean by 'One decayed pram?' Was that a local joke, too?) Mrs. Beech bent to the scrawled shopping-list which suggested it had been written with the handle of a frying-pan dipped in blacklead. (*One divorced Begum?*)

For the moment she abandoned the item, and even the grocer, who had made his usual deferent little matutinal joke to her ('What can I do you for to-day, Madam?'), and moving to the door strove yet again to make sense of the chorus on the Green. What it was she was never to know. What it sounded like, roughly, was:

MM-a-tee a happy morn
Osy-wosy ree-ta-day
Carefree mum-de-ums are we
Husty-Kumpew-ha-ha-dee;
Coke ah-fay the livelong day
And Mar-war sweedle — BEE!

Well . . . at least the Mum-de-ums, having Coked their fill, had the grace of self-derision, for the chorus ended with a burst of laughter (some of it, surely: a little forced as was only to be expected if they believed they had voices, thought Mrs. Beech, between compassion and amusement), and the echoes had barely died away when two

things happened at once; the village Band, practising for the annual Red Cross fête, burst into a just recognizable version of *Poet and Peasant* as Mrs. Durden hurried in one of her amazing outfits down the hill which hid her cottage from the village, and to cries of welcome from all present, was instantly engulfed by the songsters, so that you only could locate her by a long and orphaned poppy in her bonnet.

Mrs. Beech returned slowly to the grocer.

Light, ho! Light! The item on her shopping-list was 'One domestic broom.'

II

Sometimes the Vicar in reviewing his parishioners for the benefit of newcomers to Daisydown village would tell them that Mrs. Durden was such a plucky woman who was devoted to John, her only child, left a widow in her early fifties, and ever since had maintained a struggle against great odds to keep the rent paid. When the Vicar knew his listener better he allowed himself to remark that of all the feckless slovens in the parish she was, he feared, the worst. She had in point of fact only been equalled in his experience by the late Mrs. Twankey, also a widow — curious how the will-to-live seemed stronger in the female than in the male. Mrs. Twankey, an interesting and not untypical example of the fatal results of money coming suddenly to families totally unused to the handling of it, was the local laundress and had been the ruin of many of his collars and surplices. Many, many . . . She also left the imprint of her hand upon handkerchiefs entrusted to her, and frankly the Vicar had his moments of believing her not to be quite right in the head, although her son, Aladdin (yes, he and John Durden were only children) was brainy enough, and excellent lads both though, possibly through the deprivation of a father's authority, not very *manly* . . . For had not the Vicar's wife herself once gone to the laundry to lodge complaint, upon which Mrs. Twankey passed quite two pounds of sausages through the mangle

while a domestic miscellany of linen she fried lamentably in dripping upon the kitchen stove? And then she took to falling down in the most public places. It wasn't, the Vicar related, that she hurt herself, apparently, so much as the *way* she did it. One mustn't speak lightly of illness, of course, but it was sometimes really most complicated and extraordinary, and unhappily enough roused the mirth of some of the less desirable of the villagers; there was something positively acrobatic in these tumbles which were, the doctor thought, traceable to some epileptic source, unless it was the local water. He'd even mentioned it to Sir Richard, the squire, and Whittington said that so far his cellar was holding out, thank God, so he couldn't say, and that in the case of Mrs. Twankey it might be due to an insufficiency of the local water, ha ha ha! The Vicar, vexed at the joke when he had seen it, had hurried off to pray for the widow. And then, if as a newcomer you had passed muster with the Vicar and said the right things about the Government, the Licensing Laws, his gladioli and Mussolini, and could distinguish between Saxon and early Norman pillars, he would tell you that just as the Twankeys had settled down to a permanent condition of indigence, a hitherto unknown relative appeared upon the scene, and from that day all was chaos, culminating in the death of Mrs. Twankey.

The relative, brother to the laundress, was, said the Vicar with firm tolerance and keeping his voice dispassionate, a wealthy Bayswater Jew who had amassed a fortune in copper. A Mr. Otto Abanazar (originally Ebeneezer) he had founded the firm of Abanazar, Ananias and Co., and fancied himself as a connoisseur of antiques when the soundness of his bank account warranted this educated flourish. Motoring through the village he had noticed the name of Twankey above the outhouse, and all unsuspecting, bade his chauffeur to draw up. Upon discovering the close relationship between himself and the proprietress his embarrassment knew no bounds. It was said that he had even offered to buy the widow out so the name might be erased and possible discovery among the Smart Set of Bayswater averted.

But the widow liked the laundry; there was, the Vicar's wife

supposed, something in its activity, its confused muddle, its baskets of local linen arriving which kept her imagination and her speculative mind likewise on the boil. She was, as she frequently remarked, a one for her joke, and her punning comment — oh, quite unrepeatable — upon the subject of a slip, property of a newly-made bride, was all over Daisydown by nightfall. And Mrs. Twankey, whom one would have thought had everything to gain by a chance of retirement from her washtubs, either refused the offer point blank or (more likely) failed to understand the business hint, which seems to have enraged Mr. Abanazar, for from that moment he attempted her ruin — of course, h'm, the Vicar's listener would understand that here was no question of *that* nature involved, he should, perhaps, have said her professional downfall. The fellow was, perhaps, not exactly dishonest so much as an astute business man, and he quickly dazzled Mrs. Twankey by his cash offers for sundry objects of ornament in her cottage, and — curious, this — was as ready to pay a good price for a worthless souvenir as a bad price for a good one. It was, one supposed, a gamble: these old cottages so frequently concealed treasures unregarded by their owners that later fetched hundreds at auction. And it was (as usual) thanks to the friendly advice of one of the Vicar's most valued workers in the parish, Miss Queenie Good, who it was not too much to say devoted her life to fighting the forces of evil (had she not twice redeemed Devlin from drink and caused the poacher, Herne, to reform?) that the Twankeys literally fluked into affluence. Before her, this blonde slip of a woman, even Mr. Abanazar had recoiled, abashed, just as he was about to make a contemptuous offer of a few pence for an old brass lamp that had caught his eye on the chiffonier. For Miss Good, slipping between him and the acquiescent, ignorant widow, gently suggested that the lamp be cleaned first.

Was it luck? Did she mistrust the man? No one, said the Vicar, will ever know. But it was A Guiding. For the first rub given to the lamp revealed it to her more educated eye as being a priceless example of early Persian work and made of solid gold. Miss Good, 'the fairy godmother of us all, I sometimes call her', continued the

Vicar, took it upon herself to have the thing valued in London by experts, and who shall say, who *dare* say, that sheer personal worth, simple though its owner be, cannot triumph over the crafty worldling: succeeded in removing the object in person. Abanazar was in a cleft stick. His face! As good as a play, so the Vicar had heard, for if he feigned ignorance of the value of the lamp it was obvious that his price would be unfair, while if he admitted its value . . . why, the fellow had tried to stand them out it was brass, and it was then that Miss Good answered, ‘Of course the thing is very old, but if the lamp’s what we expect it might be possible it’s gold, it’s always better to protect a doubtful object from a sale that might a money loss entail. To-morrow I will take the train to London. I’ll be back again, and only trust the news I bring will nicely settle everything’.

And she had, and it did, including Mr. Abanazar. And Mrs. Twankey and her son moved to a pretentious, rococo and highly unsuitable Arabian-nights-as-conceived-by-Tottenham-Court-Road mansion where they lived in an extreme of pseudo-oriental splendour — the Jewish race was a little prone to ostentation, said the Vicar temperately — and gave parties that were quite incredible for their expense and childish horseplay. Her son had actually bought his way into the underskirts of London society and made a match deliriously unsuitable with a Princess Soshi, a minor globe-trotting royalty of some obscure far-Eastern country, whom he met at a charitable dinner party for which the tickets cost two guineas, and five guineas if you wanted to be a Steward, which meant nothing at all except three guineas on to the food and your name on the programme. But Aladdin and his Princess were at least consistently kind to Mrs. Twankey, who lost no time in dancing and cocktailing herself into her grave of pure excitement and gratified swank. Gin was her evil genius. . . .

And Miss Good went back to her social work in the village (she was the backbone of the voluntary choir and could and did sing anything at the village socials and concerts, none of which was complete without at least two solos from her, of which the waltz song from *Tom Jones*, *Because*, *Until*, and *Roses of Picardy* were

typical favourites). Always sunny, never minding where she was put on the programme, perfectly willing to fill in if a hitch occurred, she would sing even more fervently to drown the noises of contretemps and mask the falling of a hammer, or setting-up of scenery. . . .

III

Now, Mrs. Durden—well, the whole trouble with her was that Mrs. Twankey had been a bad influence and her sudden luck over that wretched lamp a worse one. She had infected the never-too-stable Mrs. Durden with a craving for a similar piece of good fortune which showed no signs of appearing. They lived, she and John, from the poor yield of her singularly badly-tended kitchen garden and they had but one asset, a cow, which supplied their table and those of some eight other cottages with milk. Oh, the Vicar had done his best, even offered the distraught woman an infants' class to teach in the Sunday School, with disastrous results. Oh no, the attendance hadn't fallen off. It was very much the other way, which was highly encouraging until one investigated the cause.

He had looked in one Sunday and come upon a really disgraceful scene, with all the children out of hand and singing at the tops of their voices and being encouraged by Mrs. Durden to do so—he had heard her. He had been truly shocked: even with hymns . . . those grand old words to their fine, inspiring melodies; and the woman was setting the boys to sing against the girls, the five-year-olds against the six-year-olds, concluding with a positive shout of 'Now then, altogether, and let's raise the roof if we can't raise the rent!' They, led by her, had absolutely bawled 'The King of Love my Shepherd is', while she stamped to mark the time and conducted with her appalling old gamp of an umbrella. It was the *assurance* of the woman . . . as though she had been handling children, and all wrong, all her life. And it was then, more acutely, finally, dismayedly and in genuine regret that the Reverend Arthur Beech

had begun to fear that he didn't understand Daisydown village, and never would. Miss Good had been endlessly kind and sympathetic, reminding him always that the right would prevail, but the right was certainly taking its time about it. Meanwhile the village went on for ever.

Nor did the Vicar derive suitable or sufficient supplies of comfort from Alison, his wife, who frankly revelled in the place and its inhabitants. 'My dear, I *know* they're all quite mad, but can't you enjoy 'em and let 'em rave?' she would say, before running off to tea in some dubious dwelling, like the Durden's.

He couldn't. A clergymen wasn't called, ordained and paid to let his flock rave, and although his conscience was as clear as Julienne soup, upon its pellucid surface, as with that refined consommé, floated little solids of doubt and dissatisfaction together with vagrant suspicions that all was not what it seemed in Daisydown, though what it seemed heaven knew was enough to be going on with. Even the Vicarage was sometimes discouraging, being so much larger than his stipend; and unhappily his wife couldn't see eye to eye with him about the residents. For not only was Mrs. Beech warmly attached to Mrs. Durden, but had openly expressed her indifference to Miss Good.

'She's such a crashing bore, Arthur! She's one of those excellent people who make virtue repellent — I know! I know! But she does. And she can't *really* sing, you know, her voice is one of those reedy, overworked sopranos with no quality at all: it's like those best dresses she digs up for village shows, rather dated and a tiny bit tawdry and too juvenile and covered with sequins. And she hasn't the ghost of a sense of humour. I've tried her.'

But at least they agreed upon the Baron's daughters at the Hall; for they were a tragedy, these three, and the youngest the greatest tragedy. But it took the Vicar's wife to glimpse that the Baron's elder girls, Clorinda and Thisbe, were infinitely pathetic as well, if in a subtler manner. For although she had her moments of revelling in the villagers, Alison Beech was to discover that when you live among them the mere tripper's detached amusement in impossible to sustain, and you become susceptible and vulnerable in direct ratio

to your capacity for enjoyment of their more obvious antics. In time, she possessed in common with the fictional Lady Audley and the grand operatic Susannah a secret, with the rather important difference that Mrs. Beech's secret was one that she sought quite vainly to share with practically anybody, only nobody sympathetic could be found to take her up on it.

Stated quite baldly, without introspective trimmings or metaphysic stews, it amounted to a hidden conviction that the villagers were people leading double lives, one to your face and the other behind your back. And Arthur, her husband, couldn't help her about that because his job was leading them into Better Ways and Higher Paths and Grace, and all those excellent things which considered firmly need have nothing whatsoever to do with human nature; that is to say that while he could and did caution and exhort the drunkard and the loose liver he let it go at that and didn't often have time to find out what had caused the extra pint. And if he too saw the Baron's family as a tragedy, it was largely as a financial one.

S C E N E 2

I

THE Baron had married twice: his first wife presented him with two daughters and then faded from the scene. Clorinda and Thisbe, motherless, had begun life as tomboys, active and restless as monkeys, devoted to practical jokes, their tongues sharpened to a fine point by too close association with servants, they brought themselves up, and now, of an uncertain age, unwedded and probably unkissed, they expressed their reactions to fate in wild eccentricities of manner and clothes. Clorinda as lean as a harrow, Thisbe rotund as a cask, manly in voice and outlook, some unquelled hope still seemed to linger in their breasts and turned their thoughts to dress. To the surprise of all who knew them and to a village which, as a beauty spot, was perfectly inured to amazons in slacks

and shorts arriving by motor coach and cycle, the Hon. Clorinda and Thisbe clung tenaciously to skirts and even riding habits of macaw-like hues, coming suddenly upon which out shooting and at alfresco luncheons in the forest, caused passing woodsmen and poachers, such as Hood and Herne and even the Roman Catholic padre, Father Tuck, memorizing his sermon or quietly telling his beads, to be afraid with many amazements. For, as with the party dresses of Miss Good, the wardrobe of the Baron's elder daughters was démodé and bizarre, although they possessed, as they sometimes told friends, one of everything. Thus Clorinda, the better looking of the two, who had her unreliable moments of looking like an elderly boy who once had been pretty, but who, as a female, somehow failed to satisfy, would pursue the deer or hunt the fox impartially in a voluminous riding habit of royal blue with a postilion jacket of pillar-box red, while on hunting mornings the field learnt in time to expect the Hon. Thisbe in a suit of explosive checks, her auburn wig topped with a gentlemanly silk hat swathed with a long veil of acid green net and mounted upon an excruciating old skewbald who had seen nineteen summers and had a shrewd idea of perhaps three more, ewe-necked with a middle like a cask and an action like a rocking-horse.

Sir Francis Poynter, the M.F.H., loathed them both; to the Baron's elder daughters the sport wasn't sacred; they carried their arrested, adolescent sense of humour, he complained, to coppice and spinney. It was Clorinda who threw the entire pack off the scent one hopeful morning in golden October when the cubbing was in full swing by tying a bloater to her saddle and causing even old Bellman — that trusty veteran — to forget his duties and disgrace his strain; it was her sister, Thisbe, who wedged a decayed rabbit into a tree and poked it loose to fall at the feet of the squire just as he narrowly missed his pheasant, and both of them who, removing the crust of an immense game pie at a picnic, filled it with sausages on springs which, released, leaped into the air and were no more seen. And they had between them composed a dreadful chorus which they would facetiously sing even while hounds were at fault or drawing a covert, and which sometimes made Sir

Francis writhe in his very bed at night: for doggerel though it was, betraying as it did not the first elementary feeling for hunting as the shires and counties understand it, it was a quite devilish mockery of that fine, picturesque spirit of destruction which, though a man never spoke of it, was deeply in his heart and blood, the annual pursuance of which pastime had made England, though it was bad form to speak of that either, what it was.

And it's *Yoicks* and Tally and Tally!
We merrily canter along
O'er meadow and forest and valley
Bidding dull care begone.
And jolly good fellows are we,
It's who's for a gallop so gay?
We are the lads for a spree
With our *Yoicks!* and *Forrard Away!*

This, sung with a circular, pounding movement of the whip hand, like a couple of confounded jockeys, and, if dismounted, with a brisk curvetting of the legs.

'Oh, my God.' The M.F.H. would sometimes churn in bed at night with fury and shame and insomnia, the fires of which he would on bad nights, for in the season it was desirable to keep wits, eye and nerve and judgment in trim, and when the malignancy of the sisters smote him anew, attempt to quench with draughts of soda-water so cold that it went down burning and burst out of his nose like forked lightning.

We merrily canter . . .

Oh, good God! And he would then try to find forgetfulness in fiction old and new, and have to abandon *Hatter's Castle* as insufficiently soothing and quite incredibly (*We are the lads for a spree*. Oh, God Almighty!) finish up the night with *Little Women* and read it from cover to cover.

A gallop so gay. (Oh, Almighty God. . . .)

Honk — cha — Pip.

Honk — cha — pip.

He was asleep.

He had once confided his torment to that nice little woman, the Vicar's wife — soda-water, *Hatter's Castle* and all — and though she had unexpectedly and infuriatingly burst out laughing at the sisters' hunting chorus, her vivid face became suddenly sympathetic and harassed. But nothing had come of that, for the incalculable creature merely said thoughtfully, 'That's it! That's what's been worrying me! The Baron and his home, you know, and his youngest girl. It *is* Hatter's Castle, and I don't know what to do about it.'

It was of course pure nonsense: in *Hatter's Castle*, the father kicked his daughter and her coming child (nicely put, that) out of doors at night: and not only was the Hon. Cinderella not about to become a mother, but she was still up at the Hall. So what? Perhaps the Vicar's wife was going to become a mother herself and that made her a bit confused and fanciful. Hadn't his own wife clamoured for that unmentionably disgusting vegetable, parsnips, when in similar case, so that any rational person would have smelt a rat at once? And as for being a sadist, the Baron was the most rollicking and irresponsible fellow alive, always grinning and joking and hail-fellow with everyone though he must be living on credit and was chronically overdrawn at the bank; as he often said, 'I'm sitting in a whistling overdraught, me lad: drawing a cheque would be a breath of life to me, but I drew m'last breath months and months ago. The bank manager wrote me a letter marked "Personal" only this morning, and it was. Very. Ha ha ha!' And you couldn't say that the Baron's youngest daughter, nicknamed Cinders, which surely implied a certain degree of family affection however crude: was badly treated. It was true she dressed anyhow, that seemed to be a family trait, but her clothes though worn to literal rags were always of excellent cut and made of sheer silk, even in winter. . . .

And all this the Vicar's wife had told herself in a small passion of some vague remorse and protectiveness towards the girl, yet Alison Beech remained unconvinced.

Why was Cinders so much alone? Was it that, like the impeccable and charitable Miss Good, she was rather a bore? Not a good mixer? One couldn't exactly visualize Cinderella going down at a sherry party, for instance, while either of those frightful sisters of hers could set the table in a roar, on their heads, like their father. Cinders was pretty, very, in a super-chocolate-box manner, with her golden hair that she had never shingled, so pretty that one wondered why she had never married. Of course she was very young — seventeen at a guess — and of course the country was notorious for undeserved spinsters and man-shortage, but even at that one would, Alison Beech often thought, have managed something, especially since that road-house called The Forty Thieves had set up two miles out bringing all sorts of young men from London. Why Forty Thieves nobody enquired, for actually, the Vicar's nephew had told them both, there were only two: the proprietor and his wife. Perhaps it was called The Forty Thieves because the bill gave you a jar? The young man had then apologized, saying that he didn't know what it was about the village that made one burst into the foulest puns the moment one set foot in the place.

An odd thing had once happened to the Vicar's nephew when first he came to stay at the Rectory.

He had lost the way in his two-seater, and seeing a man trudging ahead of him, asked for guidance to Daisydown village. The man turned, stopped, and said 'You can only find it once a year, in winter. And some can only stay in it six weeks' — and disappeared.

Well — it *was* a dark night, being December, and Boxing Day. . . .

The Vicar interposed, 'Was the fellow tall and rather gaunt?'
'Yes, distinctly. Both.'

'Ah,' diagnosed the Reverend Arthur Beech, 'that would be Herne. A sad case, poor fellow. Melancholia and a bad poaching record. He came from Windsor originally — was actually at one

time one of the Royal Foresters, but he married a Windsor woman — most undesirable, and, as the French have it, he has worn horns ever since.' The Vicar glanced apologetically at his wife.

I V

It was this kind of thing, plus the unending problem of the Baron's household, that sometimes misgave and depressed Alison Beech so that she walked in the woods and forest as one in a dream, hardly noting the seasons and the transformation they effected upon the scene . . . It was in the case of the Baron's family more than a merely professional sense of responsibility, parochial, brisk and dispassionate, and was when the mood lay heavy upon her a thing not to be shared by husband whose perplexities and dismays at the villagers were of a robuster texture. Anybody, she would sometimes tell herself, can be legitimately floored by a Durden or a Twankey; you know where you are with that sort of knockabout business. But there was, one sometimes fearfully suspected, no knockabout as regards the family at the Hall. There if anywhere was a disease of the mind and spirit, and it was up to those who saw even as little as herself to do something about it. And there was nothing to do because one didn't know what one was up against . . . Clergymen believe in sin, nobody more so, but they're apt to be knocked all of a heap when they actually unearth any, and are much more upset than amateurs who, not being very good themselves or paid to go on being it, take for granted that everybody isn't decent, *au fond*.

And then, of course, having to live in one place put your eye out so that you couldn't after a bit see clearly about anybody: you just laughed (Durden and Clorinda and Thisbe), or wondered (the late widow Twankey) or disliked (Devlin) or were bored by (Queenie Good) or recoiled (the Baron, and at times his elder daughters). Why? Why? when one had nothing to go upon?

'I'm probably looking for things that aren't there. Once you get an idea into your head you twist everything to fit that idea. Arthur

often says I'm frivolous and childish. I'm not. If I were a child I might see the whole family at the Hall objectively, as children do, without subtlety or prejudice. . . .

'Clorinda and Thisbe—they're terribly funny at times though not always as amusing as they think they are. Arthur doesn't even think them funny, but on the other hand he doesn't know what I mean when I say they're somehow pathetic, too. And a vicar of a parish *ought* to be on to that kind of thing. But it takes a woman . . . there ought to be women in the church.'

She'd actually said so once to her husband and he answered absently that Mrs. Binder was there at this moment dusting the pews and that he believed she gave satisfaction. Miss Good had recommended her.

'I hate the Good!' had shouted Mrs. Beech, quite indefensibly. And—heaven only knows how he had got there—suddenly Devlin had looked right in at the breakfast room window and said without even the preliminary courtesy of good morning, and making what for him was quite a long speech, 'That's right! you're one of us! and I extend to you a welcome as my latest friend, avoiding henceforth as we shall the good, we'll trap her yet and all whose cause she would uphold. As leader of this fearful band I welcome you—', but at that the Vicar put down *The Times* and his toast and closed the window and even remarked quite sharply that Devlin evidently had had a relapse and was intoxicated again. 'He's perfectly correct about the local Band: it's quite dreadful, the instruments need replacing though the men are keen enough on practice nights, but as for being the leader of it, that is simply a lie. Marsh took on that job three years ago. Music is *not* Devlin's province, and anyway the whole question is beside the point at this time in the morning. Of course he's never forgiven Miss Good for making him sign the pledge, poor fellow, but I will *not* tolerate familiarity.'

The Vicar sighed. Another discouraging day had begun.

MRS. BEECH wasn't looking forward much to her day, either. A new family had come to Dormer Grange and must be called upon again, and it was the sort of family you must keep visited as there was chronic illness on the part of one of them, and when you had married into the church you had to be specially solicitous about that kind of thing and let no sick bed slip as it were through your fingers.

It was a call which invariably made her yawn, in spirit, at least: for not only were the magnificent grounds shockingly neglected and overgrown and understaffed, but the young unmarried mistress of it, the beautiful Miss St. Cope (spoken Sincopy) lay all day long upon a sofa in the drawing-room in winter, or in summer in a hammock in the garden, in a state of somnolence which had been over the years expensively and unhelpfully diagnosed as sleeping sickness and sleepy sickness and infantile paralysis.

Alison Beech would never forget her own first visit to Dormer Grange in the afternoon of a late summer, the smouldering sun which brooded over the silent house, its gardens tangled with rioting roses in every shade, like a Burne-Jones picture, its crazy pavements weed-grown, briar-trespassed, the graceful fountain dry and dumb, her impatient peal at the wrought-iron bell-pull whose jangling roused the echoes and sent a flight of tame doves over the tree-tops . . . the ringing again and yet again in mounting indignation, this was disgraceful! Even the servant who opened to her at length and what other domestics she had glimpsed seemed to be half asleep . . .

But in the drawing-room, lavender and the encroaching roses pouring their heavy odours through the french windows, she had been received adequately enough by an elderly woman, handsome and grave, a Lady St. Cope, godmother and aunt to the afflicted girl, she said later over the tea-table. Yes, Sylvia was an orphan and had travelled much in the East with her father: it was that which

made one so anxious, the fear lest this absolute apathy be, after all, the dreaded *Beri-beri*.

And over the weeks, as Alison Beech became a trusted friend to this kindly, harassed and lonely woman, she confided one spring morning a little more as they bent over the sleeping face, so exquisite in repose however unnatural that Alison exclaimed 'She is beautiful!' Lady St. Cope assented, then remarked abruptly, 'Too beautiful,' and half to herself, 'It might be that —' and stopped.

Alison answered unerringly, her intuition heightened by affection and interest, 'You mean, it was the reason she never married? She was so beautiful that it gave her a sort of inhuman aloofness?'

Lady St. Cope hesitated, swept the face of the Vicar's wife obliquely with her fine eyes, and plunged.

'You've hit it, I'm sure . . . *she had no offer, ever.*'

'Incredible!'

'But true. Oh, admirers, yes, as you admire a statue or a painting, but men don't want a work of art in their home; but flesh and blood . . . would you believe me, Mrs. Beech, if I told you that she's never been kissed?'

Alison stared, then, 'I can believe anything of the country,' she said, quite violently, 'and now I suppose it's too late!'

'Oh yes, too late,' assented Lady St. Cope, sadly. The girl sighed and stirred in her sleep.

II

It was Lady St. Cope, an ex-Londoner and woman of the world, that Alison dared to question about her views on her husband's parishioners; an outside opinion, particularly one obviously unbiased, knowing as Lady St. Cope had the eminent of her day, recluse though she now was, would possibly be illuminating and even helpful.

'The Baron? A war or trade creation, I suppose? There is certainly nothing about him which suggests birth . . . no, I haven't yet met his youngest daughter: she must take after her mother's

side of the family, as you describe her. Yes, I like the Poynters immensely — absolutely typical English upper middle class.

'Abanazar? Never heard of him. We go to Sotheby's or Christie's for valuations. Princess Soshi? I believe we have met at an' Academy Soirée or the Siamese Embassy. Pretty girl. Her uncle was once Attaché to my husband in Singapoie. By the way, my dear, it's pronounced "Soshee", not "So Shy", it's like those wretched lychee nuts that the English will pronounce as written, when it's "Leechay".

"Thank you, I'll remember. And what about Twankey? Mrs. Twankey was Abanazar's sister.'

'Indeed. Oh, that's pronounced "Tuanchee", and means "The master's man", or house servant, in Malay. Twankey is merely a corruption and points to the fact that your "Twankeys" have always come of menial stock.'

'She kept a laundry here.'

'I daresay,' responded Lady St. Cope, to Alison somehow reassuringly and superbly. 'It's a very curious fact that nationalities gravitate to specialized trades: Jews turn to tailoring, the Greek to peanuts, the Italian to ice-cream and piano-organs, the Turk to carpets, the German to Delicatessen, the Swiss to hotel-keeping, the Scots to Editorship and gardening, the French to dressmaking and cooking, the Chinese and lesser Orientals to washing.'

'And Mrs. Durden? Have you met her?'

'I have indeed. *What a character!*'

'You like her?'

'I don't know, but *what a character!*'

'You feel that, too?'

'One has to laugh even at sight of her,' diagnosed Lady St. Cope, 'but it's *kind* amusement . . . where does she get those incredible sunbonnets like giant sweet peas? She strikes me from what little I've seen of her as being a cross between Dan Leno and Mrs. Wiggs — but you, of course, are far too young to remember Leno. How he used to make my husband laugh!'

'But I wasn't, and I did! When I was six! — '

'Too young,' pronounced Lady St. Cope, 'he wasn't a child's

comedian, I think, except superficially. He had, like Chaplin, that unique quality of pathos in his humour which only appeals to the adult, and it's that which I seemed to recognize in your Mrs. Durden . . . but what an untidy garden!' she laughed suddenly, 'like ours! But you know, funds simply won't run to a sufficient staff at places like Dormer, and it was in a shocking state of neglect when I signed the lease, but I just couldn't resist it. And the quiet! It's like a dream . . . You know, it's a very odd thing, Mrs. Beech, but even though we've spent a small fortune on trying out cures for Sylvia, I find myself sometimes not remembering that her sleep isn't a natural one, and catch myself signalling people not to wake her.'

S C E N E 4

I

HALF a mile from Dormer Grange in the doorway of her cottage Emma Durden sat, arms akimbo, wondering what she could contrive for her own and Jack's supper. To the passing observer she was just an elderly village woman typically and no doubt reprehensibly doing nothing at all, for there was nothing about her face or attitude to suggest an irresistible admiration of sunsets or effects of light on the tall elms bordering a nearby field, neither did she suggest that at any moment she might commit some poetic lines of simple rustic beauty upon a sugar bag. For her attitude was grim and provisional, her face immensely determined — even a little masculine and wryly humorous as of one upon knockabout terms with fate and God, one who daily invited life with sarcasm to do its next damned stuff. Her clothes, if you were a cad, invited suppressed laughter, for they were even for a cottager of a make and pattern and material startling and rousing to the conventional eye, and aged, withal, and darned and patched with wilful neatness like a crazy quilt in the worn places with a care which suggested

the incredible proposition that she was no poseuse before stark circumstance.

Upon her bony form she wore a skirt of mustard-coloured calico sprinkled with green discs the size of crown pieces: round her flat breast was drawn what our great-aunts might recognize as a spencer of wool in hue a cheerful magenta, and her long, lean legs were encased in scarlet stockings, home-knitted and ringed racoon-like with black, ending in elastic-sided boots from which the thongs projected. She clung to the fashion of an earlier day no less in the disposal of her hair which, showing no trace of age, was jet-black and arranged in side-curls that tapped her melancholy cheeks, and topping her chignon was that sunbonnet which Lady St. Cope had likened to a giant sweet pea.

She sat there, arms akimbo, thinking. And presently she delivered herself of speech, and even of song, disjointed both. They said in the village that she was a bit mad. She wasn't. But poverty and widowhood (and even marriage) will do much for a woman whose forceful character can find no food to feed itself upon. And her son was only in casual employment, for all his looks and willingness, and that soured a woman . . . and the cow, Buttercup, needed oil cake and fodder and litter and things which had to come out of your own stomach and Jack's, or she would go dry, and that meant no food. It was a vicious circle.

It was even said in the village that when Mrs. Durden went shopping she wore a small handbell in her bonnet which in moments of facetious greeting of friends she would raise and ring. And this, again, like most gossip, was but a half-truth, and owed nothing to mental derangement. The handbell was often indubitably concealed in turn in the recesses of her large assortment of outrageous hats, but the original cause of its presence there was from that most pathetic of all reasons, loneliness.

Emma Durden's mother had kept a small general shop in Lesser Daisydown; it was the store, the pub, the club of the entire village and an inexhaustible source of interest to the mother and daughter, who, tied by its claims and that of the home, were unable to take a very active part in what social life existed, and but for the tinkle

of the shop bell, harbinger no less of profit than of gossip, might have had but a monotonous time of it. Then the mother died; Emma, not so young now, married and became a mother and a widow in the shortest possible time, finding herself in the early fifties with a young son to keep and educate in a village whose inhabitants were, though friendly enough, but new friends when all's said.

Close companions — he would have fought and died for his mother — Jack Durden must go to school, leaving Emma much alone, and it was then that she first conceived the notion of the handbell. For ringing it, hearing its cheerful tinkle above her head, brought back at once the lamp-lit general shop, the neighbourly voices of enquiry and traffic no less than the mingled smells of yellow soap, dog-biscuits, calico, cheese, bacon and bullseyes. For the bell her hats and bonnets were not only nostalgically apt but the safest receptacles, she being, and knowing it, of a forgetful turn. And now in the early winter of her life she thought of the shop, raised her bonnet, rang her bell and gibbered a little with long and plastic lips. Then spoke.

'And they've all gone. They've gone so long they must be there by now.' More irksome memories than the death of her girlhood's circle succeeded and once again she was pestered by the spectre of the late widow Twankey. 'No better than me she wasn't, to start with, and then along comes uncle 'Ave a banana and buys a lamp off her chiffonier and before a startin' price is arranged nothing must do but what its got to be gold, and she got so grand that fish and chips was always on the table for tea and she could afford to eat asparagus with a silver knife an' fork instead've a spoon. I give you *my* word. Uncle . . . all any uncle ever did for *me* was to lean over the counter an' say "Same as last week, ninepence."

'Widow Twankey . . . I should think she was born fifty years B.B.C. by the look of her. I asked her once 'ow old she was and had she turned fifty an' she said "I've turned it until it creaks, dearie". Always a one for her joke, I'll give her that. And the kindness I've shown that woman! I shall never forget the time she first set up 'er laundry in the village an' hadn't so much as a roof to 'er

mouth an' I had her as a P.G. — that means Pay Gradually as I soon found — and she passed a very rude remark to me one day an' looked at me with the greatest self-contempt, and I said "Well I hope you don't mean what I think you do because if you do y'room'll be wanted and it's better than your company any day in the week!" an' we had a bit of a disagreement, an' the constable comes up and "Ho", he says, "what's that there doin' to this 'ere?" and I says "That's my P.G.", "an' could you describe'er appearance?" says he: "I could", I says, "but I hope I'm charitable and I've no head for figures".

And gradually the recollection of this ancient brawl lightened the face of Mrs. Durden and she burst into song.

I'm one of the women you read about,
I'm Glamour Girl One of the press,
For my photo and views papers form up in queues
And I've had a proposal from Hess;

She broke off. "Yes and it *was* a proposal, too: he wanted to melt down me face for bullets. He said "Guns or butter, love?" and I said "Thanks, I don't mind if I do". I thought he said "Gin or Bitter?'"

Dukes and Marquesses ring at my knocker
Prime Ministers knock on my bell
For I'm one of those women you read about
Who make all the newspapers sell.
Oh — I'm greater than Garbo or Marlene
For I weigh sixteen stone in m'shoes,
I've got *Je ne sais quoi* and a lot of S.A.
Though the L.S.D.'s missing this many a day;
All the men write me thousands of letters
Though mostly they're orders to quit,
I'm a oner, a dasher, an H.E. home-smasher
Oh boys and your grandpas — I'm *It!*

Twilight was creeping over the kitchen garden what time Mrs. Durden had delivered herself of this ditty, and her face set again in

grimminish lines. She rose to inspect what vegetables there were for the supper pot.

She wasn't a liar, although Herr Hess had never made any proposal of any description to her, nor had her photograph ever appeared even once in the Parish Magazine, nor Fleet Street evinced the most sluggish curiosity about her doings and opinions. The whole outburst, inspired by envious, retrospective rancour at the widow Twankey's amazing luck, was simply wishful thinking. And that is not unpathetic.

With dreary familiarity, a prescience of their taste, she pulled a beetroot, some onions and a cabbage. She'd make a stew for Jack. Only there wasn't any meat to go with it.

The gaining shadows hid her face down which a tear was sliding. She wiped it away with a small lettuce.

II

Over the hill came a voice singing, a very different sound from the recent robust delivery of Mrs. Durden, for this, while nature did her work of changing the scene from sunset to dusk, was a soprano, largely untrained but full of earnest simplicity and feeling upon the higher notes. It was Queenie Good, returning home from visiting a sick neighbour and cheering a death-bed further up the road.

It was an artless ballad, for her répertoire was notable rather for human appeal than variety, but hearing it, you felt that all unworthiness would shrink and shrivel as she passed.

In slow waltz-time, it was one of those songs which make erroneous statements about nature, particularly in its horticultural manifestations, culminating in a comparison, equally mistaken, in its diagnosis of the human heart, but hearing which and in spite of its tangled symbolism and essential preposterousness, audiences took their emotional cue and were romantically hypnotized into applause.

Red roses bloom
But for an hour
Sweetness's doom
O'ertakes the flow'r
Ashes of roses I hold in my hand
As I think of you,
Faded the leaf,
Silvered the hair,
Smiling through grief
Never despair
Spring will return with its blossoms of hope
If your love is true.

warbled Miss Good.

A light curtain of mist descended.

S C E N E 5

I

WHILE Lady St. Cope sped the Vicar's wife from Dormer Grange, Queenie Good ministered to the sick, Jack Durden scoured the village for work, Mrs. Durden soliloquized at her kitchen door, Devlin returned to his nefarious activities triumphant at having secured a new ally against his old enemy Miss Good in the unlooked-for person of the Vicar's wife, and even as the Princess Soshi was bedecking herself for a dinner party five miles away while Aladdin Twankey, her husband, paced the magnificently vulgar hall of their bogus-Oriental mansion, a figure flitted about the forest gathering firewood. The shafts of sunset, piecing the interlacing foliage, picked out as though following such prettiness of intention the golden hair of the Baron's youngest daughter, Cinderella. It seemed as if nature itself were apeing theatrical art in conspiring to heighten each charming point . . . of head, of youth, of fluttering

silken garment — sadly torn, yet dainty, somehow, withal — of graceful legs and white, shapely feet.

But forests are forests, brambles are eternally brambles and burrs no less so upon an autumn evening, and the wood-fetching was a painful business, and slow. She was used to it, revelled in the space and silence after the turmoil of the Hall. . . .

Her father kept but one resident servant, a page-boy who did boots, knives and heaven knew what besides. As with his young mistress, the work was never ended; it was the willing horse over again. Clorinda and Thisbe were quite hopeless. She sometimes fatalistically supposed that their domestic ineptitude was a legacy from more opulent days when open house was kept. Apart from that, they were of course out so much, and they hunted and rode a lot, and sometimes Cinderella was on the verge of a flashing vision of injustice and inequality so monstrous that she shut eyes and ears and mind to it and moved about the Hall and its enormous kitchen like one in an evil dream . . . because if you once allowed yourself to see and *feel* . . .

The day of the Baron's youngest daughter began at six in summer and seven in the winter. In a huge and rambling garret, rat-infested, unheated and remote, she would rise and wash in icy water or risk no wash at all until mid-morning when the range was going for the luncheon. And then, dressed in clothes too thin, the hard part came, for she must, six mornings out of seven, rouse poor sleep-sodden Buttons, the Page, and watch his form from which fatigue was not yet banished tear itself from oblivion and note the dull acquiescence that suffused his awakening face while he drew faculty after faculty together as a cripple collects his crutches, and ground grimy knuckles into blinking eyes as he stumbled up and staggered about his room off the main kitchen.

On coldest mornings the range, stoke it as they might, took an eternity to heat, and by that time Clorinda or Thisbe would have stormed in wanting cans, tea, help in the pulling on of hunting boots, breakfast, and father would be awake and ringing or shouting. And father must be kept quiet and if possible out of the kitchen because he cuffed Buttons. And that was so painful to Cinderella,

the extra misery inflicted in a day of misery upon a companion in distress, that it must be averted at all costs. Her fear of its happening was as great as her own dread of the stepsisters. For they never hit one, and that was somehow terrible. They had their ways. But the downright blow wasn't one of them . . . and two people in the world knew what those ways were, the Page and herself. If her father knew or guessed he made no sign of it; the master of the house is a thing apart, preoccupied, and in this case chronically harried by the money question for all his joking front, and if his youngest daughter flitted his domestic quarters pale and silent and timid, why she had always been so: as different as chalk from cheese compared with her elder sisters.

Her babyhood he had admired and petted in passing, as a man does, his mind half on the next bit of pleasure or business, and if the child cried, there was a mother to soothe and silence and the rooms of the Hall were large and remote . . . and then one day the mother wasn't there and the child was fourteen, it seemed, and money was deuced tight and somehow one rather forgot that there was a third daughter in that huge old ramshackle place, she was obscured by the other two, already in their late twenties or thirties — he didn't remember. They might have been any age, with those faces, combined with the cantrips and pranks they played. But good sports, both, a man knew more or less where he was with 'em, and as for not having married, what could you expect, with faces like theirs? Dammit! a man wanted to know what he was kissing, a woman or a female impersonator . . . and the Baron for a moment would ponder, pansyishly, for the very notion of either Clorinda or Thisbe in emotional acquiescence however brief with any male just couldn't be done, unless, of course . . . but there! Well, dammit . . . you know . . . I mean . . . I ask you. . . .

Breakfast, and indeed most meals in the Baron's house, was nominally eaten in the vast dining-room, but far more often the

family foregathered and ate in the kitchen. It was warm, convenient for the handing of dishes and the carving of those gargantuan joints, hams and chickens that the master of the Hall was still able to obtain on credit. He had last paid a tradesman's bill in 1903 and the receipt hung in the morning-room, framed. Even to-day a title is a title and it was a bad morning when the Hall came down to eggs and rabbits. Mr. Devlin or Mr. Herne brought the latter to the great oak-beamed back-door and Cinderella shrank from taking their rabbits in because Mr. Herne had a bad name in the village for poaching and Mr. Devlin not only had a worse one but looked at her in the wrong way as well, as though he wished her ill, and they had to take the rabbits and pheasants because father wasn't a very good shot or Clorinda and Thisbe either. Sometimes they forgot to load the gun or pointed an umbrella by mistake or peppered one of the other guns while he was stooping to retrieve his own bag. But in the autumn the family was at least out of the Hall half the day enjoying those alfresco hunting or shooting picnics to which Cinderella was never invited but which needed so much cooking and preparing for. 'Nobody wants a little beast like you spoiling everything,' Clorinda would tell her. 'If I had hair the colour of an underdone omelet I'd put my head in the gas oven and cook it harder,' Thisbe would amplify. And although her looking-glass told Cinderella that she was pretty, it didn't seem to mean a thing, and what the stepsisters said became the only truth, so that gradually a fixed inferiority complex was set up in the girl's mind and remained with her, active or subconscious, and giving some justification to the pronouncement of the Vicar's wife that she wouldn't exactly go down at a sherry party.

It was the Page-boy who stoutly maintained that the sisters were mad with jealousy, but two circumstances stood in the way of the comfort that such an idea might bring: one, that constant dislike and coldness and bad treatment bring their own distorted truth, and two, that a constitutionally sweet nature is inhibited from the protection which gratification at such a state of affairs would afford to a character less self-effacing and diffident. The Page would express his immediate feelings quite openly to his elder mistresses and —

amazingly — they accepted it, although sometimes the kitchen resembled Billingsgate Market in the rush hour in its quick-fire of unflattering repartee, but beyond a cuff or two, Buttons held his own. There were two reasons for this, unperceived by the cowering Cinderella.

You cannot discharge a servant whose arrears of unpaid wages are lost in the mists of time.

And Thisbe admired red hair . . .

Sometimes, brooding alone in the kitchen, the Baron's elderly daughter would sit and long for this lanky youth of nineteen or twenty to kiss her. Quite simply, she wanted to know if her large hand was capable of a womanly gesture, if, perhaps, it could lie with tenderness upon that carroty crop. She wanted with an aching intensity to find out exactly of what, if anything, she was capable, and there was no man willing to show her, and never had been. And then Clorinda or somebody would come bouncing in and one buffooned in self-defence.

Another iron in Thisbe's soul was her suspicion that the Page was in love with her youngest sister. This she would discuss openly with Clorinda, and relief was obtained through the fact that one could hide one's true motive behind moral outrage at the social enormity of the idea. A lower servant and the daughter of a Baron!

Together, temporarily united, Clorinda and Thisbe were two entirely different persons from those the public was allowed to see . . . humour and horseplay were forgotten, and it was but two rancorous and illimitably dissatisfied women who talked together at those times. Their counterparts, did they but know it, could be discovered in many a county and cathedral town all over England. Apart from these intervals of evasive confidence, the elderly sisters, while not loving, were drawn together by the unmentioned bond of their common plight, their shared and picaresque lives of battered splendour and standing, which, like the bills, was mainly on paper, and the tastes which at least they possessed in an absolute degree. An acid pleasure moreover was frequently derived each from the other in unfavourable comparison. For if Thisbe's hair was an auburn wholly improbable and suggestive of the rims of

mid-Victorian baths (thought Clorinda), were not Clorinda's long nose and lean ankles a catastrophe which nature at least had spared oneself? (reflected Thisbe), a mental consolation far from unknown to families less eccentric than the Baron's if we were all honest, which of course (and probably thank God) we are not.

It was a bond, this insurmountable ugliness, and to the credit of its victims, the sisters not only seldom brought it up openly except on mornings peculiarly exasperating, but derived a modicum of psychic sustenance from each other's looks, especially on visits and at dances where no competition by either of the other need be feared and campaigned against. Although, here again, it did not always work out that way, for it sometimes occurred to Clorinda (or Thisbe) that if the entry into an alien drawing-room of one plain woman is disconcerting and depressing, the appearance of two must be doubly so, a circumstance which must tend to put each in a worse light than if she stood alone. Not, heaven knew, that there were any potential husbands round about, a way the country has. For Clorinda and Thisbe had seen all the bachelors through their first childhood and the middle-aged men through their second, a dilemma which we understand is still a feature of our social system.

III

They had in over a quarter of a century had a try at everyone, but their methods lacked system, for in the middle of the most likely-looking business, the freakish and fatal sense of fun would claim one sister or the other and at one fell swoop undo the spadework of weeks.

There was the wealthy Mr. Abanazar who had once spent a night at the Hall and been most friendly: but Thisbe, in an access of good spirits at this luck and all it might bode, of wifehood and a home of her own, had filled his silk hat with flour, while Clorinda, making a pass at young Aladdin Twankey before he was snapped up by Soshi, had so woefully overplayed her unpractised hand that the young man left the Hall at once in considerable alarm.

To him that hath shall be given and nothing succeeds like success, and it is a fact both reprehensible and saddening that those women with least shall be deprived of even that because they haven't more: that the plain woman is devoid of attraction and attention because of her lack of attraction, and devoid of knowledge of her life's business of winning attention because she lacks experience in the game through her lack of attraction. And sooner or later she retires from the unequal contest and takes to the poor or the church or spiritualism or lapdogs or vegetarianism or practically anything which will sidetrack the pity or sympathy of her friends.

The Baron's daughters took it out in practical jokes and extraordinary clothes and baiting the youngest of the family.

I V

It is, or sometimes seems to be, a fact that even the unhappiest soul alive has something or someone to live for and the person who has neither is usually to be suspected. Even Mrs. Durden had her son and her hand-bell memories, even the Baron's daughters their gusto for life, even the Page his young mistress. For Cinderella herself there was her cat, a huge brindled tabby with a fierce and remarkable face that looked, but couldn't have been, a Persian's. From close association with his family, Tibbles had become practically human — some people, including the sisters, went so far as to say that he wasn't in the least like a cat at all and that they'd seen better imitations in Wardour Street . . . But be that as it might, Tibbles was a prizewinner at the annual Show in the Domestic Class. He had but one rival, in the cat owned by squire Whittington, who, three times Lord Mayor of London, had long retired from public life and was settled at The Hurst with his wife, Alice (née Fitzwarren). He made an adequate squire, and with no money troubles, he having bought the large wholesale dry goods warehouse in Cheapside, property of his late father-in-law, Alderman Fitzwarren, which paid excellent dividends and never passed one, now every year entertained the local gentry and looked just what

he was, a good, kind, elderly merchant with no nonsense about him.

He took the periodic defeats of his own cat, an equally enormous beast, in excellent part, but stuck to it he was a better mouser. Be that as it might, both animals were of an alarming intelligence when they chose. The squire's cat, Billy, knew in time the right train to Croydon that would convey him to the Cat Show and would become restless until he was put on to it and had twice trotted to the station and caught it himself and been discovered sitting in friendly sort with the guard in the luggage van sharing cheese sandwiches. Tibbles knew whom he disliked and who threatened his young mistress and, biding his time, would suddenly strike with a paw the size of a halfpenny bun, or tear a fatal portion from the enemy trousers.

Clorinda and Thisbe loathed him and he was perfectly aware of it, but whether some foggy chivalry lurked in Tibbles's furry breast or whether he was uncertain as to the sex of the sisters, his tactics with them were of a subtler nature; for them he would lie in wait and place himself so that they tripped over him and fell, knowing as he did that cats do get in the way and accidents will happen. At picnics he would stalk them and climbing a tree nudge down rubbish or birds' nests upon their heads, or, descending rapidly when their attention was diverted, empty their plates of titbits with a strong backward kick of his striped hind leg. Sometimes he lay upon their best hats, and he had once arranged with a ginger female cat from a nearby farm to have kittens in Clorinda's latest toque. Tibbles knew that this feat was beyond himself, though he did his best to keep the local supply of kittens going. And lately he had perfected a really superb bit of business: for, affecting to be terrified by a dream as he lay in front of the vast kitchen fire, he would spring up and rush to the nearer of the sisters, butt her agonizingly in the stomach and slide under her skirts before she could beat any portion of him; in an extreme of assumed alarm he would then leap through window or door to safety. Or he would hide in the grandfather clock and wait for a sister to pass, then rush out, causing the door that protected the pendulum to crash into her face and upset whatever she might be carrying. A hundred times

the sisters had threatened to have him 'done away with', but there was something in that eye, fixed and glassy, which caused the threats to remain verbal. . . .

S C E N E 6

I

THE Vicar's wife sat one pleasant morning of late September inusing over a letter which had come by the breakfast post.

Her sister had asked if she would take in her two children for a few weeks while she herself took a rest from the housekeeping and went to stay with friends in Hampshire, 'a long-standing invitation that I've never seen my way to accepting, you know what it is with two children in the house.' Alison didn't, and that was just the trouble; for her nephew and niece, Derek and Doris, now about nine and ten years old, might annoy Arthur or scribble on his sermon paper and be noisy or chivvy the hens, and in any case they ought to be at school. But Mabel, her sister, had had Ideas, which ended in home tuition under a governess, and that probably meant that the girl was backward and the boy a milksop and both of them out of hand. At the same time, the Vicarage was large and there was no use in pleading lack of space, as Mabel perfectly knew, confound her.

Mrs. Beech ran a distracted eye over the possible playmates for her nephew and niece and discovered with a shock that beyond the village children there didn't seem to be any. There were the Two-shoes brats of course, and the Blues, and the little Boopeep girl, but they were all socially beneath Derek and Doris who might pick up accents and make Mabel angry. And there were the Ridinghoods, but there the same objection obtained, and the Ridinghoods in addition were saddled with that frightful old Mrs. Woolf, the grandmother, who shut all her windows and was probably germy and wouldn't do a hand's turn but preferred sponging on the Riding-

hoods for produce that the unfortunate youngest granddaughter had to take over to her several times a week.

Or there were the Muffets, but the Muffet child had nerves and had been put on a diet of whey and Pasteurized milk and sour cream and was rather ruled out of rough games which brought on attacks of giddiness and increased pulse-beat and gave her agoraphobia which kept her much indoors owing to her fear of open spaces. And she screamed at mice and trembled at spiders and burst into tears at beetles and altogether was one of those children who ought to be kept in town. The whole thing dated from a bad local outbreak of scarlet fever which old granny Woolf had sweepingly diagnosed as 'The Plague' or 'The Pox', and it was she who had made her grandchild wear a red cloak ever since, as they did in the reign of Charles the Second, to prevent pitting and pustules, which to-day are treated with ultra-violet ray. There was method in her madness though she'd forgotten the reason.

That left the little Blue boy: but he had lately joined the Boy Scouts' Band and made life so hideous for neighbours within a half-mile radius of his mother's cottage by practising with persevering stridency and no ascertainable progress upon his cornet that they frequently wished he had never been born or Lord Baden-Powell, either; and he might make Derek noisier and want to have a cornet, too, and Arthur would go quite mad and look more like Savonarola than ever.

Alison Beech broke the news to her husband the moment he had said Amen to his boiled egg and he consented at once to have the children, but then he was a Good Man and it would be herself who would have all the trouble of them. But both Mr. and Mrs. Beech agreed that the presence of the governess was unnecessary. 'If it's to be a holiday for the children she'll be unwanted and if she expected to sit with us it would be horrible,' decided Alison, 'and one can't put her in the kitchen or explain why a bed-sitting-room would be so nice. A gentlewoman would understand without explanation, and prefer it, but this woman may be semi-demi and they're always queasy and taking offence if you don't introduce them to all your friends, or if they aren't asked back to other

people's houses. And now we shall have to break it to the servants and if either of 'em walks out on us we're sunk.'

But Cook took it philosophically enough, and the maid, Marian, actually beamed. 'Well there, m'm, that *will* be a bit of life about the place,' exclaimed the pleasant girl whom her mistress stood in daily dread of losing, as Marian had for over a year been Walking Out, as she put it, with Robin Hood.

And so it was settled. Mabel wrote gratefully. '... and it won't matter a bit about there being no suitable children for the dear Babes to play with, they've been much in the society of grown-ups and aren't used to children, and what I always feel is that as they have to grow up and will stay it, whereas if you're a child you spend all your time ceasing to be one, it doesn't matter.' (Is Mabel quite dotty? wondered her sister.) 'Derek is such a manly little chap and says the quaintest things. Last week —'

It was at that point that Mrs. Beech put down the letter and went to order luncheon.

II

She wondered, as she contrived the children's quarters above-stairs and scattered some pretty enamelled furniture from Heal's (pink for the day and blue for the night nursery) which of the many possibles her small nephew and niece would prove to be: would they, in brief, be the logical outcome of a besotted mother or the racketeers of her own premonition? Would they lisp for fairy tales or play a reasonable game of bridge? Go to sleep clasping flannel rabbits or discoursing to the last about the various types of aeroplane?

The dear Babes ... then they must be even younger than one remembered and all the Heal furniture would go by the board ... and would that involve a reshuffle, from miniature beds to cots? On the other hand, children don't, the childless Mrs. Beech calculated, even begin to talk intelligibly until they're at least four, let alone be Quaint. Or was it that mothers rated ga-ga'ings and frothings at the mouth as the beginnings of whimsicality?

She became easier as she remembered the governess. You don't engage govs. for toddlers.

III

There came an afternoon when the station fly creaked up the Rectory drive and deposited her nephew and niece upon the doorstep.

Alison Beech, the smile of aunthood wellnigh smitten from her lips, gave one look and internally ejaculated 'Gosh'.

For Derek and Doris, Babes though Mabel termed them, looked at least fifteen or sixteen, yet were incredibly dressed alike, in suit and frock of forget-me-not satin, lace collars and socks. The boy's hair was worn in a curled crop, and the girl had what one hoped wasn't a permanent wave, and had they changed clothes there and then nobody would have been a penny the wiser.

The dear Babes.

Gosh.

Why, it wasn't going to be decent to let them occupy the night nursery together. . . .

But when, as lightly and carefully as might be, their aunt put it to them, they assured her earnestly that it was an arrangement to which they were accustomed. 'You see, Doris would be frightened of the dark without me to look after her,' said Derek, and Doris added, 'I must be there in case Derek has a bad dream, Auntie. Oh, what a pretty, pretty room! I think we shall be happy here, don't you, Derek?'

'Oh yes, Doris. Are there fairies in the garden, Auntie?'

They were nine and ten years old. They *said*. (Like the child in *We are Seven*.) For, looking at their faces, their aunt gradually discovered that although they resembled children at a distance, seen more closely, Doris might easily have been a young married woman, and Derek a woman married or single. And although he touchingly declared his determination to protect his sister quite five times a week, it didn't, somehow, enhance his manliness. And was

poor Mabel a little deaf that both the children spoke with such unnatural clearness and articulation? And was it quite boylike to powder your knees after taking a bath?

And those dresses and suits!

For unpacking, helped by the maid, Marian, the Vicar's wife lifted out with mounting dismay suit after dress, all cut on the same lines and of the same colours and materials, whether satin or plush. Marian thought them sweetly pretty, and said so, adding that she'd be ever so proud to take such a pair for walks and out gathering what she called Flahs in the woods.

Well . . . it was only for a few weeks and the village children put on some rather weird garments themselves every now and again, even young Blue, the cornet-playing Scout, had only recently ceased to endure the shame of a Fauntleroy outfit of much the same colour as Derek's in which he made hangdog appearances at Sunday School, while the suffering little Muffet girl wore habitually a best frock that, once the property of her grandmother, had been handed down and cut up and dyed, and was draped and pannier'd and made the wretched brat look like a monkey on a stick.

Mrs. Beech mentioned casually (for one must support Mabel, one's own sister) that her nephew and niece might like to wear something less spoilable in the country, but they answered that the clothes were all they had, except, one gathered, for more at home in Onslow Gardens of the same type. And there their aunt must dubiously leave the matter.

IV

Over the days, she noted that the affection between the two was, as she put it to her husband, as real as it was artificial, and when he patiently awaited elucidation she said that what she probably meant was that though it was always demonstrative and on show and none of the reserve one expected from children of that age and of opposite sex, somehow she couldn't find herself believing in it, to

which the Vicar (how should he?) found nothing to say whatsoever. And their aunt further observed that although Derek in clear, enthusiastic tones often announced his love of climbing trees he was never seen to do so. Nor need she have feared for their suits and frocks, for they kept them in a state of immaculacy wholly unbelievable and disconcerting. Perhaps sartorial awareness was a feature of The New Child of mothers with Ideas? And even custom couldn't use Mrs. Beech to the spectacle of the pair sharing a room, except that, once in bed, you had to remember that Derek was a boy for there was nothing, at any rate about his top part, to suggest it. Nor could one stomach with conviction the sight of each child clasping doll and Teddy bear in slumber . . . one felt, at least in the case of Doris, her aunt once caught herself thinking, with guilty amusement, that the doll was a *pis aller*, if not positively *faut de mieux*.

But they were at least indisputably amenable and invariably sunny and never noisy; Derek indeed was not only never observed to avail himself of the traditional brotherly privilege of bullying his sister but spent much of his time protecting her from non-existent dangers, and would place her behind him in the wood upon even meeting such excellent fellows as Robin Hood, which made Marian laugh very heartily and term her young charge a Regular Cough-Drop and a Curc. And quite soon Hood became their hero and playmate, showing them the hideouts of birds' nests, teaching them bird-calls and the difference in note between what Mrs. Beech termed the Spotted Measler and the Frenchcombed Spitcurl, so that quite soon she was willing that they should wander the glade and fields alone, leaving Marian to return to a more profitable polishing of the Vicarage silver.

Another villager to whom (heaven alone knew why, thought their uncharitable aunt) the children immediately attached themselves was the egregious Miss Good who was frequently to be met in the lanes and forest either, according to report, singing to herself as she gathered wild flowers for the bedridden, and at Christmas moss, leaves and berries for the church, or escorting a band of village children on what Alison Beech learnt with a shudder of vicarious

embarrassment she termed 'nature rambles'. And in spite of their height, their aunt reflected, the Babes, as in high secret irony she sometimes called her nephew and niece, really seemed to enjoy these self-conscious outings. Over their supper they would tell her of the day's doings and their feeling for those whom they met . . . Miss Queenie Good, to Alison's disgust, secured top marks.

'Oh Auntie, she's like her name!' elocuted Doris (*you blithering little idiot, she's never had any chance to be anything else: virtue's a hobby with her, like bead-work*).

'Well, I love dear Robin!' cried Derek, looking at that moment and rather unfortunately taller and less manly and more girlish than ever. 'We hope that he and Marian will live happy ever after!'

(Gosh.)

Because, of course, if Marian did give notice as she might any moment for the sake of this good-looking oaf in green pullover and red corduroy slacks, it meant breaking in another house-parlourmaid and heaven only knew where she was to be found. If one had the little Ridinghood girl to train that would mean her blasted old grandmother carneying about the Vicarage and leaving with a suspicious basket every evening . . . The Boopie child might do. But she was careless and forgetful and had once driven an entire flock of her father's sheep into the wrong fold one evening and they'd all been taken to market and sold by mistake, next day; and on another occasion she'd lost the whole lot and they'd strayed two miles and scattered, and half the village had to help round them up. Even the squire had driven up with a ram in his Daimler, and Soshi with a ewe and two sheep in hers. They'd grazed and cropped and fouled and trespassed other holdings and altogether it had cost farmer Boopie a matter of fifteen pounds before all claims were satisfied, though even then there was a County Court case in respect of a lamb dropped on alien territory and nobody could prove anything either way as the little animal was naturally born unbranded. And if a girl did that kind of thing outside the house the Lord alone knew what she would do inside somebody else's. And the Muffet child was equally impossible in her way. One couldn't face the prospect of a houseparlourmaid who had neurasthenia in the kitchen,

where Florence, the cook, reported there were beetles, and — would Florence be reasonable over cooking whey? (if one *did* cook the revolting stuff).

v

Sometimes, Alison would try and get a line on the villagers by pumping her nephew and niece, but the annoying creatures at first could help her not at all. In that mood, their aunt thought, only Henry James could have understood and written of them: for she suspected at times that Derek no less than Doris was deliberately leading her to think they both thought the conventional and right thing about everybody. It was one of those psychologic-psychic-cum-metaphysic mix-ups that Mr. James would have enjoyed to the full, a sort of morbid leg-pulling of the grown-up owing to some Freudian maladjustment of the psyche, thought the Vicar's wife, to whom the Parish Magazine and even *The Church Times* was seldom enough.

Jung . . .

And then the village, as it did, inviting that lamentable commodity, the pun, as her elder nephew had once discovered: 'Teaching the Jung idea how to shoot.' And, cinematographically speaking, they wouldn't. It was not perhaps unreasonable that immature tastes should pedestal Hood and bask in the beams of Queenie Good, and the fact that Doris and Derek openly championed Cinderella was, somehow, merely another annoyance, leaving one's secret misgivings as to the girl's welfare in that madhouse which was the Hall unimaginably cheapened, and the day that Doris exclaimed with her too-perfect diction '*Poor Cinderella! she is so unhappy!*' Mrs. Beech merely wished to slap her niece because she herself had many times suspected the same state of affairs so poignantly that she couldn't speak of it at all. Out of the mouth of babes . . . but one still wanted to slap or box ears when Derek loudly and sturdily added in accents no less ringing '*We will protect her, Doris, and we'll sing and dance for her*'. He played the ukulele

and both sang duets . . . and according to the delighted maid, Marian, the creatures actually did — in the forest, in the Baron's kitchen, it was all the same to them. And they were equally willing to entertain the Vicar and their aunt, had not the latter put her foot down at last, shielding the Vicar from scorching by these too redundant rays of sunshine when he wanted to read *The Spectator* and balance the Offertories.

But she observed with amusement the children's exaggerated shrinkings from Messrs. Herne and Devlin, a recoil encouraged by Miss Good and probably by Cinderella as well, and grew to be positively sorry for the two unfortunate ne'er-dowells of the village when, herself out walking with nephew and niece, they would sight Devlin or Herne, and forgetting height and age and social gifts, would scamper to take refuge behind her skirt like backward six-year-olds, and peering from over her shoulder (to avoid looking over her head). 'We must look so *dam* silly,' reflected their aunt, who was merely five-foot-two in her stockings. It very nearly made her like Herne and Devlin! For they would come upon these nocturnally dubious persons in the woods and lanes being perfectly innocuous and frying bacon on fires of bracken or munching sandwiches, and the Babes would stage an act in no time that only a murderer would justify.

'It narks a man,' Devlin would say to Herne, who would console his fellow scallywag with half a poached rabbit or a clutch of, as it were, poached eggs, until it was his turn to excite an act, when cigarettes would be passed to the embittered ejaculation of 'Blasted little B—s: there was I measuring me tea and no harm to anyone and up comes those three and 'Ho, the wicked wicked man,' says the little gurl. I ask you!'

It was depressing. For Devlin's hopes of enlisting the support of the Vicar's wife against Miss Good and her pesterings about strong liquor seemed to be dwindling. And it was his eternal bad luck that so far Miss Good had never caught him drinking tea, but only going into the local at opening time. Yet he'd dragged his tea all over the blooming forest to try and make her catch him at it, but it was no use, off she sheered along another clearing or ride,

whereas on the one occasion when he'd been flush enough for a bottle of Guinness to drink out of doors she'd met him at the first gulp.

Devlin was not unbroken to the picture palace, and as the days passed and the Vicar's nephew and niece outcried ever more shrilly and uncomplimentarily at sight of himself, his thoughts began to turn and twine upon notions of retaliation. Old Good wouldn't like it, either. . . .

There was ransom . . . or a beating-up. . . .

V I

And there was, thought Alison Beech, another thing about the children besides their almost theoretic contradictory championship of the oppressed and vows to 'protect' the Baron's youngest daughter, which didn't square with their no less theoretic shrinking and cowardice before Herne and Devlin, and that was that when it came down to characters, rorty, antick long-in-bottle specimens like the Hon. Clorinda and Thisbe and Mrs. Durden, neither Derek nor Doris seemed to have any feelings or opinions whatsoever. They appeared to regard them as perfectly unremarkable furniture of the village and were not even remotely amused or curious when, for instance, Mrs. Durden on first meeting them had exclaimed, 'Oh, why was I born without a mother!' and on passing by took from her pocket a yard-measure and extended it saying, 'Well — so long', and that seemed to point to the fact that either the children or Mrs. Durden were definitely queer, and the question was: which of them was the ones? And it all made Alison feel more than ever as though she were living in a dream or having a nightmare so that she almost longed to fall out of bed by mistake and find it was breakfast time and sanity, after all and probably the result of toasted cheese the night before.

And yet there were eccentrics — and idiots — in every village of England, probably as the result of intermarriage and boredom and unemployment (like poor young John Durden) so that a promiscuous

baby came cheaper than a mug of four-ale, though not nearly so pleasant in its after-effects as beer which you could at least hiccough away and forget, whereas you can't maintain an unwanted child by hiccupping at it.

And Arthur was so trustful and objective and good, and didn't really see anything with the inward eye, but took it out in agreeing that this was one of The Eternal Problems of Rural Life, which pronouncement, though important-sounding and like statistics and White Papers and Government Reports, got nobody anywhere.

And it wasn't only the Hon. Clorinda and Thisbe and their hunting chorus parody in winter, because every year as Christmas drew near, it seemed to Mrs. Beech, the entire personnel of the village became accentuated and 'more so' than ever, and the Hon. Cinderella looked extra downcast and fugitive and her stepsisters became more uproarious and extravagant in their sartorial colour-schemes. Even Mrs. Durden joined the procession and became quite amazing and stupendous about the skirt and stocking and hat, and the Baron himself was reported to have been seen singing a topical song, the burden of which was 'You'd really almost think that Hitler meant it' with two broker's men who at last had descended upon the Hall, but who were also reported to be most cheerful and obliging and always ready with a joke, and liked sitting about the Baron's kitchen. Which last item, retailed by Marian to her mistress, had actually driven the latter, full of indignation and foreboding, to make a formal call, cardcase in hand, for the very idea of such coarse proximity to the Baron's youngest daughter misgave her.

VII

It is a small thing to report, and may arouse the amusement of many who did not have to live in Daisydown village, but it is a fact that on ringing at the huge and antique bell-pull of the Hall, Alison Beech experienced a feeling of physical nausea when the door slowly opened as though with difficulty or through the insufficient

strength of the opener, and that in the entrance lounge was no human figure but a huge tabby cat, property as the Vicar's wife knew, of the Baron's youngest daughter.

The door, of course, must, after all, have been unlatched, and some chance breeze or vibration swung it inwards. And cats go everywhere about a house however large, she told herself, while knowing that she neither meant nor believed her diagnosis of the incident.

She stooped to the great beast mechanically, cupping one furry ear with her hand. 'Well Tibbles, where's your little missus?' And then she received another impression, equally fantastic, for the cat instantly and rather exaggeratedly, so she put it to herself, began to behave just like a cat, with a great business of purring and obtuseness as though to cover some previous action that might have given him or somebody or something away. He became deaf to blandishment and her reiteration of names of his owners: suddenly yawned with selfconsciousness, as cats do, to fill in a pause, and even began a strong toilet in the middle of the Baronial flagstones with a mast-like hind leg at extreme elevation.

Alison loitered, at a loss. You can't gatecrash even a small house let alone mansions like the Hall. And no one had answered the bell.

Or had they? . . .

She looked dubiously at the elaborately occupied cat. And you can't ignore a bell of that size and sonority.

Her own voice echoing along that interminable expanse of passage was startling even to herself, and no less so in that she wasn't aware that she had premeditated speech.

'Tibbles! Where's Buttons? Buttons! Buttons! *Buttons!*' The Page was after all a resident servant. The only one. But then he often accompanied the party from the Hall to lug the vast picnic hamper.

''uttons,' gloomily responded the echoes, "uttons — ttons — ns.'

The cat rose and eyed her, walked round her, looking up, rubbed against her as though in some hasty apology for incivility, and a partial solution came in a flash to Mrs. Beech.

'He doesn't trust me. He's sizing me up, weighing me. I'm an

outsider and he knows it, though he senses I mean well by Cinderella.' And inexorably, 'He's on guard. And he opened the door.'

Sorry for herself in some indefinable way, for the animal at her feet, for the Hall and its inmates, she stooped and felt the cat's ribs. To her infinite relief he was well-covered: wasn't he after all a prizewinner?

And as if he guessed her thought, Tibbles thudded behind the hat-rack and emerged with a large flatfish in his mouth which he laid at her feet.

The success of the call hung in the balance. Was or was not the beast making her a present, or conveying to her his own well-being? She thanked him seriously, to gain time, and then luck was with her, for she stooped on impulse and took the plaice in her hand (oh, her best gloves!).

'I shall enjoy this for my dinner, dear old boy.'

She was very careful to close the front-door herself.

Back in the avenue, a certain quality in the weight and texture of the fish conveyed itself to her preoccupied mind and she realised that it had no smell and left no stain.

It was in point of fact of canvas, stuffed and painted, the dots along its grey skin very brightly dabbed on.

It was Thursday evening and a busy one: Girls' Friendly, the organist to supper and the Mothers' Union accounts. She put the plaice under her handkerchiefs in a drawer and would think all that out later. Increasingly she longed for a confidante.

The 'Babes' were no use. They were, somehow, in it too. . . .

S C E N E 7

I

Two days later Mrs. Durden, moving about her cottage, debated rival claims upon her brain; her mind was a battlefield in which every nerve must be strained to discover the best way out and how to put the best foot foremost.

Item one: the Vicar's lady was most kindly coming to tea and that meant a spread, or slighting the quality.

Item two: there wasn't a thing you could offer her likes, and what to get for even Jack's and her own supper was nobody's business. Only it was. It was hers, and the anguish of hostess and mother without means had its way with the widow, and pranked and romped and fleered and tore at her being, and upon her periodic collapses in a daze of hopeless indecision upon a three-legged stool used for milking, the demon of despair settled far more securely upon her shoulder and sibillated unthinkably of the only possible way out of All This. And even that would be only temporary until the money was gone, and then back they'd both be without pet, income, partial employment and source of nutriment. For apart from that side of it, having a pet, even if it were only a cow, gave you a bit of change, like; going out to rub her nose broke the routine: feeding her filled up a day marked only by housework and grubbing something to eat from the kitchen garden: her lowing kept you company when Jack was out, and if she sometimes gave you a bunt on the backside it was all in play and affection, and doing yourself over with Elliman's Embrocation gave you another change from the cooking and cleaning. But the best of friends must part.

Buttercup must be sold.

Mrs. Durden, repassing the milking-stool for the seventh time in four minutes, collapsed upon it once more and gibbered a little. Jack must be told, and he'd create alarming.

And just then, a ray of sunshine which found no fellow in the breast of the seated figure fell quite suddenly and with an effect of deliberation upon Jack as he ran down the path and stood, framed, at the door.

II

Viewing him, that gallant eager figure, it was easy to understand the mother's love for the son, almost equally easy to agree with the dictum of the Vicar that neither young Twankey nor Durden were very manly, for well-built Jack had his moments of suggesting

a handsome girl no less than the Hon. Clorinda had hers of recalling an old boy who had once been pretty....

The widow's face cleared instantly as he exclaimed: 'h'Well mother dear, all alone? But there's one thing: if England goes to war, the shade of Nelson shall not be disgraced, and h'while the British Bull-dog shows his teeth, the guns shall bark defiance once again.'

Excited by the war news, Mr. Durden burst into song:

It's everybody's war and we'll all be in it,
We didn't begin it
So what do we care?

Clean of heart, clean of hand and wasting no minute
We'll lend to the limit, the foeman to dare:
For we're all in the front line
The We'll-bear-the-brunt line
Air, land and sea, civilians too,
For it's your war and my war
It's a Victory-or-die war
Three cheers for the red white and blue!

Already, the inspiration of the sentiment had set Jack marching buoyantly up and down the room. . . .

It was, perhaps, the measure of his mother's total depression that, sitting there, she thought some long thoughts about children and, as she termed it, the aggravating nature of singing a song like that at a time like this, when you was feeling like the devil's punch-bowl. Jack wasn't barmy, and he must know if he thought that if there was to be a blooming war he'd have to go to it and leave her, and with Buttercup gone, too.

Her face set in grimmer lines, and she unconsciously clenched fingers upon a stout broom-handle as her son plunged into a second chorus which informed his maddened mother that a Service known as 'Hell's sky-blue angels' would be positively in their aeroplanes and even piloting them in the event of hostilities: that 'Tommy' would be authentically in khaki (with his tommy-gun), and that the sailors might confidently be looked for upon an element described as 'the

foam', a sartorial and topographic combination of circumstances which whoever wrote the song appeared to think highly pathetic and commendable, 'as though', girded Mrs. Durden confusedly, 'the Navy wore kilts in peace-time and took to motor-bikes'.

And as if it all wasn't being sufficiently enough without more, three things happened which tried her to the full; for upon her son's repetition of the chorus, the wireless next door actually burst out into it too as though it were encouraging the boy to carry on in that silly way, and through the vibration of his valiantly marching feet, a Union Jack left over from the Silver Jubilee of King George shifted loose from a high cupboard and unrolled all down it. . . .

Now she came to think of it, young Jack had always bin a bit that way, easygoing like his father, always a one to look on the bright side when there wasn't one, seeing things that weren't there, like Durden when he got the Treemors, that time he went on the Dustmen's Outing and stood her out there was a canary playing the flute at the end of his bed for what remained of the night. And while Jack marched away on the foam she'd be on the dole. It was a doleful reflection. She spoke slowly and dispassionately.

'If I had a red-hot-poker there'd be a new face in heaven to-night.'

'Oh, mother dear, things are never as black as they seem! I shall make my fortune yet!' her son cried eagerly.

'Yes. That'll take about as long as standing in a queue for horse-flesh on a Monday morning,' riposted the widow, who, having no dog or cat to cater for and only one vegetarian pet to support, could not conceivably have known anything about it.

'Oh mother, you are blue to-day! Aren't you being a little irrational?'

'Don't talk to *me* about rations,' she snapped. And now she was irked no less at circumstance, which was being so exactly the sort of thing that hadn't happened to the late widow Twankey, than by the necessity to display an ill-humour not only essentially alien to her character but to her wish. Home was bad enough without rows but there it was: come an unexpected bit've trouble and you not only picked on your nearest and dreariest but nobody else would do, and it was all disheartening and damnable.

With one stride she was outside the cottage, broomstick in hand, surveying the aerial of her neighbour.

She clouted it once, and heartily. It snapped like a carrot. The loyal strains ceased instantly. Nor was there the remotest demonstration of indignation from the owners. They understood Mrs. Durden, or perhaps it was that they were all in this business called daily life together and that made neighbours mutually tolerant, or that when you count on the cottage next door for your milk you will put up with a bit to get it.

Partially appeased, Mrs. Durden returned, remarking, 'No wonder it's called the b — b — c.' Her son was as unperturbed as the cottagers next door and contented himself with a charming and attentive laugh, and Mrs. Durden's thoughts about offspring would have once more been long ones had not the more immediate claim upon her emotions reasserted itself.

In the discussion which followed, mother and son spoke together as relations do when minus an audience.

'She's got to go,' stated Mrs. Durden with the roundness of one who has faced the worst, accepted it and now descends to detail. 'Credit's out, garden produce is on its last legs, no cash for seeds, nothing to pawn that we don't absolutely *need*. I've got no solid gold lamps on the chiffonier to sell to anybody's uncle. If I c'd pay for more land t'grow things on we might scrape through, but I can't keep what we've got productive on nothing at all, and we sh'll lose even Buttercup's manure, but one's got to eat. And when the money for the cow's gone I don't know what t'do.'

'I've tried pretty hard for a job,' began Jack.

'I know that,' answered his mother with the fierceness of mocked pride no less than of exasperation, 'I'm not blaming you, I'm blaming — ', she paused, at a loss to nominate the enemy who at times stabs us all in the back and runs away. And she wouldn't say good-bye to the cow, she would at least enjoy that sorry self-torture, and while the beast was trustfully plodding off to be sold, Emma Durden would spend the rest of her day in the empty cottage, miserably revelling in that she was not a Judas to one who had looked to her . . . dumb, too, so she couldn't plead and reason with

you for a respite, another chance to stay in the shed she knew and liked.

The tears of overwrought nerves were already filling Mrs. Durden's eyes. And then — another thought capping the climax occurred to her and she gave a shout that was almost a shriek. 'An' the Vicar's lady coming to tea and I haven't a bean in the house! Not one bean!'

'Oh poor mother! I'll take dear old Buttercup, and you'll see —'

'Oh *get* out of my way,' exploded Mrs. Durden, 'it's enough to sicken one with your "oh mother dear" this and "oh cheer up, mother dear" that and everything in the garden's lovely.'

Jack hurried out leaving her a wreck that was already smouldering with remorse. So, one'd bin unkind and unjust, now? Oh well, let 'em all come! P'raps one'd be nice to-morrow, she thought doubtfully, for there didn't seem anything else left to be, on the unpleasant side.

III

While Jack haltered the grazing cow, hustling the beast a little that the cattle-market might not yet be closed, the youngest Ridinghood child, basket on arm, resentfully trudged the half-mile to her grandmother's dwelling. She hated these bi-weekly journeys to deliver cream, butter and eggs, home-made cakes and other goods to the old woman whose cottage smelt of cabbage-water and moth-balls and who was never good for a penny, sweets, or even something out of the basket as a return for all one's trouble and the cutting of one's time for homework or play. But Mum said we'd got to keep her in a good temper as she might have summat to leave. But s'pose she hadn't? Granny had the Old Age Pension and as for her clothes one wouldn't wrap the dog in 'em if he had distemper.

Morosely the little Ridinghood flogged along until the Durden cottage came into sight. She brightened a little; Mrs. Durden

wasn't half comical sometimes, and would share whatever there was going. And there she was, leaning against the door.

The subject of the child's thoughts saw her and regarded her meditatively; her eyes fell on the covered basket and an idea struck her. She gibbered a little and thought again, then spoke.

'Flossie, whadyer think?'

'I dunno, Mrs. Durden.'

'I got Mrs. Beech comin' to tea and I clean fergot, and me cakes aren't made and I'm out o' honey an' the bread ain't come an' Jack ain't done the milkin'.'

'Go on!'

'Fact.'

'Lor!'

'I s'pose y'couldn't oblige me with y'gran's goodies! I'll pay your Ma back when I'm bakin' next.' At least that was a promise one could keep, for with Buttercup sold one could settle the grocer and get more flour. And Flossie's face was brightening.

'All the same t'me, I'll be glad not to 'ave to go to Gran's. She makes me kiss her, not as if she liked me, you know, but because she knows me.'

'Ah,' Mrs. Durden nodded, 'kisses can be reel knockovers, as you'll find out one day, but I never 'ad no use meself for a peck.'

'I don't like t'touch 'er,' announced Flossie, hitching her detested red hood further on to her comely head, 'she don't smell nice and her eyes is awful, kind of glaring.'

'Bright's disease,' said Mrs. Durden, absently taking the basket. The longstanding disability of the old woman was, lacking more stirring gossip, long familiar to the village, on Green and in the public-house.

'Well, they *are* bright,' assented Miss Ridinghood, 'and I don't like it.'

'I bet she don't, neither, and I'm much obliged for the things.'

Mrs. Durden closed the door.

An hour later, Alison Beech toiled up the Durden's path. As with her latest visit to the Hall, she was haunted with vague forebodings: she smelt trouble for these good folk she liked so well as some people do thunder, as others divine water or foresee in the crystal. And this time there was something to go upon: for further down the lane she had passed young John Durden while on a round of district visits and distribution of the Parish Magazine, and had surprised upon his handsome face an expression so unfamiliar that had she not also recognized the cow, Buttercup, she might well have passed him ungreeted. For John Durden was looking morose, ill-used and ill-humoured as he slouched along. And although, in taking in her own presence, his face was instantly transformed to that which he had led her to expect over the years, of gallantry and youthful fervour, the first expression had undoubtedly been there . . . and that, pondered the Vicar's wife, probably meant one wasn't being a good parish hack, because it showed that one didn't really know Arthur's parishioners. But one had sensed that for a long time. . . .

And then, making hasty conversation of the improvised sort you learn when you are one of the bigwigs in a rural community, she asked John where he was taking the cow a shade too quickly to avert a probably disastrous answer not unconnected with matrimony; for villagers, she had discovered, were either completely dumb on that sort of subject out of some befogged notion of chivalry and delicacy to ladies, or dismayingly explicit, so that the face to pin on when confronted with the amorous reluctances of cattle, sheep and pigs became a living problem. Also, she suspected John of knowing that she had taken him off his guard, and he knew that she knew that he had been so taken.

But his voice and manner, if not exactly his matter, were reassuring, for he became the John Durden that she knew as he answered cheerfully: 'A change is good for everybody, even the animals, Mrs. Beech, and with a blue sky overhead and one you love in your heart we can tramp along life's highway with a

smile.' He swept off his cap and proceeded, singing, on his way, while the Vicar's wife gaped against a hedge.

When John Durden sang, he sang — unlike the villagers — for all to hear: verse and chorus, you couldn't miss it, and she didn't.

Dearest, when first we met
I can't forget that day when all the world
 seemed bright
The sky was blue
When I met you.
Parting, that brings regret
I can't forget, for with the coming of the
 night
Flow'rs lost their hue
When I lost you.
For we've all got
To go through the mill
Some time or another:
Troubles come, troubles go
No avoiding them, so
It's best just to smile
And to whistle as you go,
For we've all got
To go through the mill
Why, you may not discover,
You may think by fortune
You're the one preferred
And your heart must learn to sorrow
At its hope deferred,
For we've all got
To go through the mill
Some time or another.

'Gosh,' murmured Mrs. Beech, leaning on the handlebars of her bicycle as she watched young Durden swinging so buoyantly along the lane that the cow had almost to canter to keep up with him.

Where did these people pick up these songs? And why did they

sing so perseveringly? Was, perhaps, the village a noted musical one, as some counties are smocking and others thatching counties? But if so, why did the bulk of them sing so vilely on the Green when in unison? And wasn't it overtime that John's voice broke? He must be at least twenty-two! Unless . . . but on the other hand, the Hon. Clorinda and Thisbe both had contraltos so deep, so almost masculine, that they might have passed for baritones. There was, of course, Clara Butt . . . but somehow one seldom thought of Clara Butt when the Baron's elder daughters raised their voices. Of course, Mrs. Durden's voice was extraordinarily deep, too, but then age did the most peculiar things to some women.

Moustaches . . . and if his mother's voice was manly, John's ought to be as well; instead, he had inherited a sort of booming no-voice which occasionally upon certain notes became, if you could call it anything, a soprano.

And apart from the way John had sung at her, Mrs. Beech remained unsatisfied at his too-sudden *volte face* from gloom to eupptic vocalization. Surely by now she had won her right to his confidence? If he really were in trouble? Did he, in short, think she was a complete fool to be taken in by that toshery about whistling as you went and flowers and those you loved and mills you went through? And was there an entanglement with some village girl or was the ditty addressed to the cow? Or was the whole thing just Woolworth and the wireless? Arthur and she were not faithful listeners-in although they had both enjoyed the Induction of the Pope relaid from Rome, but the Pope of course hadn't sung about whistling and a mill as he went through it . . . he'd largely contented himself with a singularly sweet plea to the Lord to have mercy upon us, a hint that the villagers might well take, and that one so frequently felt when thinking some of them over in the quiet of the Vicarage . . . 'Of course, if the boy's in trouble,' she murmured to herself aloud, 'I'd do anything to help, and so would Arthur —'

Her meditation was shattered by a well-known voice from behind the hedge.

'You will? Then what I say is woe betide all people who are not on Devlin's side.'

'Oh, good afternoon, Devlin, what a pleasant day! and it was so cold, first thing.'

'Good day you think, m'am, yes, but don't forget much may be done: the day's not over yet.' He laughed loudly and unpleasantly.

'No, but the days are drawing in fast. I must be going on, I'm having tea with Mrs. Durden.'

The man laughed again. 'Ha ha, I say to poverty and want, the widow and her son I'll soon transplant.'

'Dotty,' thought Mrs. Beech resignedly, 'and *what* a brute the creature is! I suppose he's tipsy again or recovering from the last bout, and when you've got a perpetual grudge against life you wish that everyone else is having a bad time too. Well, I know the feeling.'

But the gleam of a scythe in the man's hand suggested that he had picked up some casual labour at last, and if war broke out he need never be unemployed on the land, with all the younger men being called up. She moved away with a good-bye that wasn't cordial. And then something happened, the significance of which she is to this day uncertain, for Devlin's scythe, describing a dangerous arc that might have sliced off her head, suddenly fell from his hand as the startled man found himself confronted with Miss Queenie Good, in fresh white muslin, poppy-crowned, and wildflowers in her hand, returned from a nature ramble. The sun, hidden behind a cloud and emerging brilliantly with her advent, confused his sight, and Devlin swore and recoiled.

'You made me jump, Miss, and what for becos? One sec you wasn't there, the next and there you was!'

Miss Good caught him up quite sharply, for her.

'I heard your threats! I know your evil power, but I will fight it! For within an hour much may befall to thwart your wicked schemes against the helpless and their fondest dreams — '. She got no further, for Mrs. Beech, thoroughly sick of them both, said 'good afternoon' very loudly and distinctly (like Doris and Derek! she recognized,

acidly), and set one foot upon the pedal while Devlin and Miss Good respectively livid and pale with altercation continued their squabble, although the latter certainly waved her sheaf of flowers as though in benediction as the bicycle rolled away.

'Blithering fool,' thought the Vicar's wife, forthrightly, 'but she has pluck of a sort; usually, these ultra womanly women can't say Bo to a goose and are so occupied in guarding their virtue that they can't see a man for his trousers.'

And then a thought struck her which caused her very nearly to swerve into an oncoming and most costly-looking saloon car filled it would seem with young and pleasant men.

Had or had not Devlin meant to cut her with his scythe? It was an incredible suspicion and must never be mentioned to Arthur because he'd worry himself thinner than ever, but Devlin *was* one of the local bad hats, *and* he drank . . . and if he meant to injure me, thought Alison, it probably means that I owe my life to the Good — confound her! For few things are more absolutely galling than to be beholden to someone you feel contempt for, and Miss Good was a really excruciating example of bromide, blamelessness and tea-shop gentility.

S C E N E 8

I

THE car slowed down and the open window became a thicket of doffed wideawakes. A voice as pleasant as its owner's face enquired with a charmingly soft American accent and intonations, 'If you'll pardon me, ma'am, we're anxious to make good time into Daisy-down village. Are we on our way? We are? That's great. Let me introduce my brother, Earle, Earle Charming. I'm Prince, both ff'm Indiana. I'm glad to know you.'

'But you don't,' stammered Mrs. Beech. In the narrow space Mr. Prince Charming smiled and bowed.

'I guess that's our loss. But a very true remark. I deal in realism as a practising psycho-therapist. You should come to Indiana, ma'am, and view our clinic. And sanatorium. Every type of mental aberration and every known neurosis is studied. What do you do in England? Put 'em in prison. Hang 'em. Deport 'em. Shut 'em up. What do we do? Treat 'em. Analyse 'em and send 'em out sane, wholesomè, sweet. The Germans may be barbarians but they know hoomanity and we adapt their methods, plus systems of our own. Your name? I like to know who I'm addressing.'

'Beech. Mrs. Beech.'

"Thank you, Mrs. Beech. Earle, meet Mrs. Beech.'

'Glad know you,' said the second wideawake (or fédora) with another delightful grin, 'my brother, Prince, got clean tuckered out studyin' and we decided to take a trip to Europe and see London and rest up in a typical English village. And this village *calls*, Mrs. Beech. And we're planning t'rent a house and we've seen a peach called "The Palace" —'

'Oh . . . oh yes. It's been empty for years.'

'It was called Palace by reason that it was partly re-built in 1683 on the site of a palace once the property've Queen Elizabeth,' instructed the elder, Mr. Prince.

'Yes. Thanks. I did know that. I live here, you see.'

'Pardon me. That was stoopid of me. Yes, no doubt that would be so. But I had a feeling that your historic building would be absolootly different as a residence from the modern house, if you get me.'

'Yes. It's a way they have.'

Mr. Charming peered at her attentively. 'Ah, I see you're laughing at me, Mrs. Beech; I can see the humorous side of anything, story, situation, it's all the same to me; just let there be an element of *humour* in it and I'm with you every time. What I mean is, I can see a joke even when it's on me.'

'How nice that is! And now, I *think* —'

'Quite so. I mustn't detain you, Mrs. Beech. It's been a real pleasure t'meet you. Oh, might I have the privilege of offering

you a lift? Hi! Rico! go an' sit in the front seat an' bring the lap-robe for this lady. This is Henrico, my Italian assistant in the clinic, Mrs. Beech.'

Henrico stepped hastily from the car and bared his head of a third wideawake.

'Please, but please! Thank you so much but I'm due at a cottage only a hundred yards off. Well, good luck to you, and if you should like the Palace let me know if I can do anything. The Vicar of the village is my husband.'

The brothers bowed and Mr. Earle stated that there were some remarkably deep thinkers in the Church of England. 'Take this Reverend Elliott, now — '. But Mrs. Beech, already late for tea, regretfully refused, and pedalled off, accelerating.

And what with Devlin and Miss Good and John Durden and that expression she'd surprised on his face, Alison Beech's temporary amusement at the Americans settled once more into apprehension and the old familiar helpless feeling of *she-knew-not-what* as she pushed her bicycle up the cottage path.

S C E N E 9

I

BUT Mrs. Durden upset Mrs. Beech's calculations by being in uproarious spirits, and whether rushing about her living-room and tripping into or falling over every obstacle in her way to the range and the kettle, or whether, with sly smile and shaking shoulder, hand clapped to mouth to point some pleasantry of her own, she surpassed, Alison thought, even herself, so that over the tea-cups the Vicar's wife began to expect the Clorinda-like practical joke, to find a fan concealed in the buns, a snake leaping out of the loaf. Only to be confounded anew, in that the tea and its service was uncommonly good and perfectly sane. There was a nice table-

centre of handmade crochet and the tea-cups were excellent willow-pattern, if a little chipped and discoloured with use (which might happen to anyone), and the food was impeccable.

Odd.

Yet, after all, why?

Was it logical or even just to gird at Mrs. Durden simultaneously for being quite incredible and perfectly normal? Did she when alone with her son drink out of rubber cups that bounced up to the ceiling, or serve supper on a cloth that was mysteriously twitched away at the eleventh fatal second?

Something in one suspected her and her ménage of all that and more, and yet one never caught her at it . . . there was of course that valedictory tape-measure and the widow's facetious and fortuitous 'So long!', but that might have been one of those things that do occasionally happen to humorists, the time and the place and the article and the apt remark. Like the military dinner-party and caviare to the General . . . for one couldn't seriously postulate that John's mother thought it out, bought the tape-measure, and walked about Daisydown waiting to extend it and say that. And although it was a fact that during the meal Mrs. Durden poured the teapot on to the fire and picked out small lumps of coal with the sugartongs, that, too, might have overtaken the absentminded and socially flustered.

On the other hand, if John were in trouble as his face had suggested, wouldn't his mother know about it and be depressed instead of carousing in antick anecdote? Or was this covering of her real anxieties a piece of improbable good breeding?

Alison remembered that she was a visitor. She would throw out feelers later. . . .

She mentioned the Americans, while Mrs. Durden, her bonnet flaring, her lips a dotted line, appeared to listen in fond attention that was, her guest discovered, partially delusive, for upon completing her news Mrs. Durden said, 'Ah, you know whenever anybody says "American" to me I think of Hoovers. A Hoover's an electric dustpan and a length of piping at one end and a good-looking young fellow at the other.' She clapped hand to mouth,

and shook, roguishly. ‘I bought one once. “It’s three pound fifteen”, he says. “That’s very expensive, young man”, I says. “Oh no”, he comes back, “not if you’ve made your pile”, so I looked at the carpet and says, “Ah, but suppose I lose m’pile?”’.

Mrs. Beech laughed too, but for the first time, began consciously to wish that her hostess could sustain a conversation instead of brandishing off into byways of reminiscence, however diverting. And — at what epoch had she bought a Hoover? How, indeed, could she ever have? There was no electric light in the cottages.

‘How you must miss it,’ she answered, ‘but to hope for electric light in Mosscrop Cottages is simply wishful thinking.’

‘That’s right! Fishful drinking. Durden was a martyr to it,’ responded the widow. ‘You know, I’ve known that man put away as many as seven bottles in the evening.’

‘Mrs. Durden!’

‘Fact. In the cupboard. *And* locked it. He said it was for a rainy day. I think it was for a wet night, if you ask *me*.’ Faint but pursuing, the bedazed Alison stuck to her guns. She mentioned her encounter with John, the young Twankey’s latest party, the field work of Devlin (suppressing the scythe): she brought up the malady of the beautiful Miss St. Cope, the charm of her aunt, she even rushed the egregious Miss Good and Derek and Doris into positions. And although Mrs. Durden listened, chin on fist, attentively, appreciatively, quick to conceal mouth with hand, lean shoulders heaving, at anything approaching humour, and although she appeared to respond, if sheer bulk of words was anything to go by, her spate of answer, firmly considered, gave you nothing at all.

And yet they said that village women were gossips!

Or was she fending one off? But that would argue practised social exchanges and a subtlety one couldn’t quite credit.

Alison plunged. ‘Mrs. Durden, you’re a mother, so perhaps you can advise me. I’m very worried about the Honourable Cinderella at the Hall’ — and waited in suspense. This grotesque woman was one’s friend and must be given every chance. . . .

But Mrs. Durden swerved angularly in her chair and answered, ‘Was that Jack? I thought I ’eard ’is step.’ It wasn’t, and she

opened her lips again for what would doubtless prove to be another irrelevant stream of souvenirs, but Mrs. Beech cut in ahead and stemmed it by drawing her gently back to the subject of the Baron's family, and was half rewarded at catching upon Mrs. Durden's expressive features a transitory look of mingled puzzlement and obstinacy.

'I couldn't say,' she remarked enigmatically.

For the first time in her association with the woman Alison's temper rose. 'Hasn't it ever occurred to you that the youngest daughter is — *ill-treated*?' she shot at her; and this time the face of Emma Durden again expressed puzzlement plus a worry that yet was in some way not concern. She gibbered a little, broke a tea-cup, and hiccupped with a 'Pardon me, Queenie!'

'It troubles me,' pursued Alison.

Mrs. Durden caught at this, folded her arms in her apron and said quite maddeningly, 'Ah, we all 'ave troubles and I 'ope I sh'll always be able to smile at other people's.'

Sheer annoyance made Mrs. Beech commit an error, for hoping to get home on Mrs. Durden, she exclaimed, 'I'm sure you couldn't be so unkind! Think of Mrs. Twankey. Just as her luck turned, she died, poor thing.'

Fatal! For at that fell name, connoting as it did all that Mrs. Durden had hoped for, of ease and plenty and variety and bonnets, of cows and crops and strong tea, of dolmans and d'oyleys and vases and self-respect and extravagance, she opened the sluice-gates of rancour and retrospect and *conte* and slander and cat and woman and widow and mother and maniac and neighbour, which flooded the ears of her guest and offered neither hope nor scope for those other matters Mrs. Beech desired to discuss.

For the late widow Twankey, it seemed, was A One, always on the go till you'd think she had St. Vitus's Veins, and full of notions when That Blinkin' Lamp got sold to uncle 'Apenny Bazaar, so that the kitchen copper wasn't class enough for 'er cooking any longer an' she got makin' French messes in a cockchafer (though Mrs. Durden didn't mean what Mrs. Beech meant, if Mrs. Beech knew what Mrs. Durden meant), still, not a bad sort even if one didn't

always see tooth to nail with 'er. And then she sells this lamp to uncle Abracadabra and from that day, believe Mrs. Durden believe her not, that woman wasn't like the same person, which was a good thing when you looked at 'er face. Parties! She was never happy unless she was giving parties, and she'd come in in pearls and vaccination marks till you got putrified with the cold just lookin' at 'er. And perfume! Well there! To put the perleece off the scent. It's women like that who fill our cemeteries with coffins — and much more to the same purpose until Mrs. Beech hardly knew whether to dissolve into suppressed internal amusement or whimper with frustration.

And just as the other widow, her hostess, was in full swing, any remnants of hope Mrs. Beech might have entertained of getting some hint or clue to the inmates of the Hall vanished completely, for events began to move, and rapidly. For into the Durden kitchen garden flocked and wandered a handsome proportion of the villagers in the wake of John Durden himself, who hurried beaming up the path, while Miss Good and Devlin, their recent difference apparently composed, fell in on either side of the latticed window.

'Oh, mother, news! And Buttercup is sold!'

'Let's hope you've brought the doings back in gold,' responded Mrs. Durden.

'Better than that! for gold is quickly spent, but I have something that is permanent for folks like us, without financial means, and here it is. A bag of runner beans!'

'WHAT?' shouted Mrs. Durden, her face contorted with outraged incredulity. 'Beans? Beans? You've gone completely *barmy*. Jack! Say you're only tryin' to alarm me!' But at sight of the large canvas bag of beans some of which her son actually poured out into her palm, the sturdy woman gave way for the first time in her life, in public, and throwing her apron over her head she collapsed upon the flour-bin, rocking with misery.

It was, to Alison, a scene unbearably painful and she shot a highly expressive look at John, as Devlin burst into loud laughter and shouted: 'So far, so good. Pride goes before a fall, and here is Jack with nothing left at all.'

Miss Good shifted her flowers from one arm to the other and advanced.

'You go too fast! Before this year shall slip into the next, I say that fortune's ship will sail to harbour with its precious burden of happiness for Jack and Mrs. Durden.'

For the first time Mrs. Beech very nearly liked Miss Good, an opinion which was apparently shared by the gaping, whispering onlookers who by now quite filled the kitchen garden and who, with that invaluable sense of tact and fair play which is so striking and contradictory a feature of the uncouth and reserved Britisher when confronted with a scrap, verbal or physical, now affected to have heard and seen nothing at all, as they burst into song and slowly dispersed while the sun smoulderingly set behind the parsley bed.

And once again the Vicar's lady strained ears to catch what they were singing about, and once again was largely foiled, though it seemed on the whole to be of an encouraging nature. For amid a plethora of Sweedle-dees and ah-de-fees and Mum-de-ums, she extracted the words 'love', 'brave', 'hope' and 'conquer'.

END OF PART ONE

Interval

PART TWO

S C E N E I

I

WHEN war broke out, which it did on the very Sunday following the sale of the Durden's cow for a sack of beans, the village, thought Mrs. Beech, became a shade more ridiculous than usual, unless all villages were being rather unbalanced, for one couldn't entirely believe that Daisydown possessed the monopoly of eccentricity.

One circumstance perversely reassured her, and that was the singular amount of political and social graft that there seemed to be going about. For without one ascertainable qualification that anybody discoverable had ever heard of, the Hon. Thisbe became a Captain of W.R.A.F.'s in full uniform, and the Baron hurried about in staff officer's kit and a (presumably hired) car which developed deafening complaints whenever anybody so much as looked at it, as Alison once remarked to Mr. Prince Charming, and on one occasion had actually telescoped in the middle of the road, which apparently caused the Baron no regrets or apprehensions of any description. 'But then,' put in the grocer, Mr. Prune, 'he's such a very goodnatured gentleman.'

The American glanced at Mr. Prune briefly and searchingly through horn-rimmed glasses. 'You think so?' he stated rather than enquired. And it was at that moment that Alison Beech thought, 'Here's a man I want to know'. And from that moment she found her confidante.

II

The Hon. Clorinda, not to be outdone by her sister, became, overnight, Chief Warden of the district, and a full year before

official uniform was issued, designed herself a quite enormously illegitimate one consisting of blue trousers with a scarlet stripe, fisherman's waders embellished with tassels, a frogged coat aglitter with buttons the size of crown pieces embossed 'A.R.P.' and a stetson hat garnished with what appeared to be a pastry-brush. She said that it was as well to be prepared, and round her neck she wore her gas-mask which, lacking the official container, she compressed into a canister marked Sago, and she also possessed a whistle, a fireman's hatchet, a tin-hat, a tourniquet, the hooter of a taxi, a First Aid case which, forgetting to fill, she carried perfectly empty, a flask of brandy and an immense lantern. When considering that Tweedledum-like figure, willing yet profoundly immobilizable in emergency, she was, one can only suppose, the essential essence of English womanhood in the autumn of 1939: eager, superfluous, muddleheaded, untrained, influential and unemployed.

Yet she found her level at the village concerts, and her song, *I'm Sandbag Sally*, convulsed the entire community, which, the bewildered Americans supposed, offered at once an opportunity to fervently loyal inhabitants of supporting war charities for the reward of seeing a daughter of the British aristocracy 'making an exhibition of herself.'

Apart from this item, the programme had followed a fairly normal course, although Devlin, to Mrs. Beech's surprise, sang *Asleep in the Deep* in a bass and menacing manner with some effectiveness, six of the village girls, in the components of whom she recognized with a slight sense of shock domestic servants and the barmaids of The Pig in a Poke, executed a wonderfully good and extremely unbeautiful high kicking ensemble followed by well-drilled tap-dancing under the title of 'The Six Sunflowers', and Princess Soshi sang rather prettily a Japanese solo called *Little Yo-San*, in a gorgeous kimono with a profusion of artificial chrysanthemums and minute fans in her hair. And the inevitable Queenie Good obliged with *Until*, *Because* and *Il Bacio*. It was when the Hon. Clorinda plunged on to the platform that things began to move, and her ditty that was to endure for the entire winter season.

I'm an Air Raid Warning
Every night and morning
I turn out on duty at the trot;
When the Wardens' whistles blow
And the sirens start to go
I'm the greatest siren of the lot!
I'm Sandbag Sally, the lily of the alley,
The men all run towards me helter-skelter,
Adolph Hitler wants appeasement, says his patience' given out
But if that's really all he wants, he's only got to shout,
And I'll guarantee appeasement any night that I'm about
For I'm Sandbag Sally, the lily of the alley
I'm Sandbag Sally of the Shelter!

I'm Sandbag Sally, the lily of the alley,
The men all run towards me helter-skelter,
Lord Woolton gives us ration books and tells us what to eat
And that starving all the family will get the Germans beat,
Well, I'm always off the ration, I'm an old-time hard-boiled
sweet,
For I'm Sandbag Sally, the lily of the alley,
I'm Sandbag Sally of the Shelter!

I'm Sandbag Sally, the lily of the alley
The men all run towards me helter-skelter,
Winston Churchill told the Air Force that he never, never knew
A case where such a lot owed such a lot to such a few:
Well, my undercarriage wants a nut but my engine's good as
new
For I'm Sandbag Sally, the lily of the alley,
I'm Sandbag Sally of the Shelter!

The Charmings motored the Vicarage party home from the Parish Room after the entertainment, and when Derek and Doris had been put to bed, discussed it over cocoa and sandwiches.

'The life of a parish priest, Mr. Charming, isn't all sitting in a rose-embowered Rectory, and when I think that two thousand

years have elapsed since the birth of our Saviour and that with all our efforts the sum-total of civilization is still a song like that — ; the Vicar shook his head and selected a sandwich. And indeed it was depressing.

The younger brother, Earle, handed cocoa. ‘Quite so, Sir. But I don’t find myself attacking from the religious slant, if you’ll pardon me, so much as from the social, and it beats me how, with all your class and caste feeling, it’s *possible* f’r a titled lady t’let off a hot number like that.’

‘*Hot, Mr. Charming?*’

‘Well, kind’ve raw. It *we* had an aristocracy in America I guess we’d be too busy hangin’ right on to it to endanger its prestige by small-time vaudeville, even if it is only ammerteur. I should say that this lady, Honourable Clorinda, was headin’ towards borderline, except that I know your old families do degenerate to a remarkable degree. She looked kind’ve nuts to me.’

‘*Nuts, Mr. Charming?*’

‘Well, crackers, Sir. Bughouse, you know.’

‘Loopy,’ murmured Mrs. Beech, and won the appreciative grin of Mr. Earle. But it was to his brother’s face that she turned, his view of Clorinda for which she waited. And he shook his head.

‘No, she’s sane enough, though I should judge a strong tendency to exhibitionism. Have you ever noticed her mouth, Mrs. Beech?’

‘Why — ’

‘You haven’t? M’m. Well, we mustn’t trespass any further on your hospitality, Mrs. Beech, no doubt Mr. Beech will be wanting to compose his sermon.’ Alison refrained from suggesting that midnight was not a usual hour for this employment as her husband led the brothers to the front door, but she managed to detain Prince in the hall while Earle inspected his headlights and the Vicar courteously simulated interest.

‘*What about her mouth?*’ she murmured urgently.

‘Pardon? Oh . . . well, I’m trained to notice trifles, Mrs. Beech, and I saw at once that typical droop to the ends of it, kind’ve crooked, that distinguishes in ninety cases out of one hundred, according to our statistical graphs, the sadist.’

'Ahh . . .

He looked apologetic. 'Now, you've got to excuse me, Mrs. Beech. I'm in fault. This Honourable Clorinda is a friend'n neighbour of yours and I fear I let my professional interest get the better of me —'

'No! No! Mr. Charming, I know you're right. I've always guessed something was wrong with those women — if they are women.' He peered at her. 'You mean, you think they're hermaphrodites? Well, that's very interesting, too, whether it presents internal, external or mental features. I guess I'm going to enjoy my holiday. If you can fix me up with a good, novel bi-sexual you'll have my gratitude. The organics are the least compelling, but they're all of value to us. Now you go straight to bed, Mrs. Beech; there's overstrain here, I see: every symptom, including restless thumbs. When you're rested up, you let me at the cause and we'll take it right out and have a look at it, whether it's suppression or — are you drinking too much?'

'Mr. Charming!'

'Oh pardon, I was forgetting you're on soft drinks. That's just one of our routine questions, and it's our experience that seventy-eight-point-two of women lie about their alcoholic consumption. It's protective, and shows in a very helpful manner that the social or herd compulsion — the parasitic instinct to cling, whether to persons or majority-customs — is the stronger motivating factor in human conduct than the individualistic effort to revolt and run amok. It's that angle that, it seemed to me, Reverend Beech didn't grasp in church last Sunday. I mean, he talked of sin. Mrs. Beech, there *is* no sin; fifty per cent of what the pastors call sin is stomach or functional disorder, the other fifty is mental distress that gives way to treatment. Though I appreciate,' he added kindly, 'that if once this fact were generally assimilated it'd get the religious programme all shotten to pieces and put the Purity-bugs in the bread-line.' His handclasp was warm and enveloping.

'Mr. Charming, you *are* a comforting person.'

He reddened with pleasure. 'We aim to help, Mrs. Beech, an' those words of yours are a mighty big inspiration to me. I'd heard

the English were stiff an' unfriendly, but — ', his gesture sketched future refutations, 'and your kindness to Earle and myself over our move into The Pallus, well it was simply great, simply great. We'll take it as a big favour if you'll give us a line on what form of house-warming'd give most pleasure to the neighbourhood. We don't have to consider expense. I'm prepared to come across with up to two thousand dollars — your four hundred pounds.'

If half the soul of Alison flinched at that, its other half liked the simple directness of the announcement, recognizing it as inseparable from an outlook of which she had long stood in need.

'I will, indeed. I'll think it over. I should say a dance. After all, Christmas will soon be upon us and everyone likes a dance, and you have such a lovely ballroom at The Palace.'

'It is, now, but it had the dry rot terrible, *terrible*. It cost me a matter've three hundred dollars to get that parquet flooring back into shape, Mrs. Beech.'

'Really! . . . and, Mr. Charming — '

'Would you call me Prince, Mrs. Beech? I'd take it as a favour.'

'Thank you, Prince.'

'I shouldn't expect to call you Alison, you understand, or your husband Arthur,' he assured her earnestly, 'but I'm interrupting you.'

She hesitated. 'I was going to make a rather odd request, and I don't know how to put it.' He was all attention at once. 'It may seem odd to you, Mrs. Beech, but a piece of routine to *me*.'

She plunged. 'I want you to help me to understand the villagers.'

'I shall be delighted.' But he was obviously disappointed.

'No you won't! But it's because I think you'll feel as I do about most of them that I'm asking you.'

He waited.

'Prince, I sometimes don't know if I'm crazy or they are.'

'Well, that's splendid; we'll go into that right away. I'll be round to-morrow. Good night, Mrs. Beech, and very many thanks for the cocoa. Is it a typical English drink? I'm always interested in national customs.'

'I'm afraid it is,' faltered Alison.

'Indeed? It is freely used in X-ray photography for detecting obstructions or foreign bodies in the patient, and its progress down the alimentary tract is plainly perceptible; but I didn't realize it was drunk in a social way. I'll remember that.'

'Hey, Prince!'
'Coming, Earle!'

III

It was true that the brothers owed much to Mrs. Beech upon their arrival in Daisydown as tenants of The Palace. With tact and humour she broke their fall for them, dropping here a hint that the tradesmen did not take with ease to being addressed as 'Brother', letting fall there a suggestion that it was the privilege of the established residents to make if they wished the first advances heralded by the formal call, indicating elsewhere that the landlord of The Pig in a Poke knew not the term 'highball', nor could mix one if he did.

But apart from such little contretemps as Daisydown's tendency to regard the Charmings as aliens because they spoke English with a foreign accent (except the Princess Soshi who was irrevocably foreign herself, poor girl), and save for a strong party headed by Mr. Prune who believed that the brothers were Royalty owing to the unnatural nature of their Christian names, they settled down to rural life wonderfully soon; and nobody could have exceeded their zeal for the Allied cause upon the outbreak of war. For that fiery spirit, Earle, declaring that Hitler was a menace to world civilization, wrote three letters confirming this to the county newspaper, while Mr. Prince averring to the last that America and England were one in this epic struggle for democracy, spoke twice a week to that effect upon the village Green to the edification of all who were not too busy doing war work to attend. And it was a fine sight to see the grim lines on the face of Messrs. Prince and Earle as, with fist smitten into palm, they affirmed America's full support of England against Germany short of declaring war against Germany.

Indeed, they shook down in the village far sooner than Mrs. Beech expected, for she omitted to reckon with that large majority

(in which were included the sonsy, tap-dancing maids of The Pig in a Poke and the inmates of The Home For Mentally Deficient Girls) who had long become *cinéma*-conscious and who, upon assimilating the nationality of the new arrivals, saw in them with the eye of faith replicas of any idol of the screen, clippings of whose likenesses happened to be occupying the bedpost of honour in their rooms at the time.

I V

Alison Beech, over-sensitized to the whole place, observed no less keenly and far more acutely than the Charmings the reactions of Daisydown to national emergency. On the whole, she thought, it ran true to type, to that type which was her private impression of the population, though there were surprises. For if the Baron scurried about in uniform hindering everybody, and Clorinda and Thisbe clowned in Service kit, and Robin Hood joined up at once without fuss and looked very manly and winning and likeable in his battledress, while Devlin was defeatist and rather confusedly pro-Nazi in his public-house moments so that Miss Good gave him a white feather in full view of his jeering audience before flitting off to minister angelically at the Cottage Hospital, others baffled her expectations entirely.

John Durden, for instance, didn't join up at all, though he was sometimes heard to sing a stirring number entitled *Heroes of The Old Home Guard* and repeated it by request at the Parish Room with a series of tableaux as descriptive background, beginning with The Battle of Waterloo and passing via a modern group of old Chelsea Pensioners to Hood in battledress embracing somebody's symbolic old mother, and this was received with cheers and stamping of feet. And although John had not joined up nobody dreamed of offering him a white feather, which was, surely? odd. Nor did the Twankeys cease to entertain, while the Page, Buttons, at the Hall hadn't apparently even to register for National Service. But then, of course, as Prince reasonably reminded Alison, England was

always unready, and, as Earle generously said, lacked punch and teamwork, but would doubtless muddle through again in a very glorious manner which was an inspiration even to think about.

As for Mrs. Durden, when one might have confidently expected her to be in the thick of everything, she was, Alison realized, hardly ever seen about, these days, but was, rumour said, busy gardening.

Even when the first evacuees arrived, the village appeared to absorb them body and soul, for far from urbanizing the village children, these slum brats quickly fell into the local ways and within an amazingly short space of time were rambling with Miss Good and, worst of all, with powdered knees and curled hair, supporting Derek and Doris in their odious duets as a shrill-voiced chorus in pink smocks of most unsuitable sleazy sateen made, Mrs. Beech supposed, by the Women's Institute working-party . . . Derek played a horrid piece on his ukulele called *Black-out Blues* and Doris had a smackable solo entitled *Daddy's A Warden And Will Take Care Of Me*, with *pas seul* to pocket torch-light, and they took, at this period, to asking pretty questions of their revolted aunt of which 'Does God send the stars to light the Shelters?' was entirely typical. And the villagers sang in unison more than ever.

But in common with so many of the rural communities of England, the Daisydowners continued to be profoundly unaware of the war, and when anything did happen which forced their attention to the fact that it was no longer peace-time, they turned it into stuff for jest; and as though providence itself were conscious that Daisydown needed special treatment, it sent to that village, or so it seemed to Mrs. Beech, but one sample of everything, of which they made their joke and passed on to the usual business of living. There was, for instance, one air-raid only which sent down one H.E. bomb that hit the Durden's kitchen garden squarely, a circumstance which delighted the widow who said that it made a natural pond (or au reservoir) at no cost, of which at the moment she stood sorely in need, and when it was followed by two incendiaries she lit the fire with one and toasted a kipper upon the other, and when they burnt themselves out exclaimed, "These rotten German goods ain't made to last!" as she ran, gibbering, her sidecurls flapping,

from one to the other. And when one solitary parachutist landed upon, of all places, the Baron's outhouse, that nobleman and the still resident broker's men became extremely affable with the paratrooper and passed a very convivial ten minutes of repartee and beer during which the visitor obligingly, and in that sinisterly good English for which the German army is so famous, joined in a quartette, the burden of which was *Don't Help The Enemy By Chit-chat, Keep It Under Your Hat*, and which, strangely enough, was as replete with good-natured mockery of the British government as it was of uncomplimentary references to the Chancellor of Germany....

And once, there was an invasion practice which was, after all, perhaps no more antick an exhibition than those staged by larger localities, involving as it did the erection of incredible miles of barbed wire which was enthusiastically thrown out all round the egresses to the Green, thus causing the shops to be completely inaccessible for two days to the exquisite discomfort of the housewives, while the shopkeepers were reduced to consuming their own stock and the incoming delivery vans were dammed in a queue and so congested the road that the 'invading' army relinquished all hopes of reaching Daisydown at all and dispersed by short cuts to their own homes in high good humour.

Earle Charming, seated upon a derelict sundial, was full of zeal and of suggestions as to what the defending army should do next, which inspired the Baron, on taking in his presence in that place and upon such a seat, to remark waggishly that he perceived that here was yet another Yankee living upon borrowed time.

Also, the village blossomed overnight into a siren which the local wits let off at pleasure and resulted in the shops emptying of customers as many as six times in three minutes, and for a considerable period sundry of the residents would take cover upon the All Clear, their explanation being that they understood All Clear to be an order to get moving. And clean British fun was extracted when a Surface Shelter was built, in that for months the villagers used it for bigger and better concerts or as a rest-room after shopping, yet when an enemy bomber zoomed overhead to the yapping of

machine-guns, they poured out of it to have a look and exchange delighted comments, and when the bombs did fall, the Baron and Clorinda and Thisbe organized an extempore jazz band composed of Wardens' whistles, hand-bells and gas rattles.

Yet even when the H.E. bomb fell in the Durden's garden, the beautiful Miss St. Cope slept her unnatural sleep through it all. Herne continued to poach, the villagers to take duty at fire-spotting in a ten-acre field without so much as one stand-pipe, and the Baron's youngest daughter to flit fearfully the woods for kindling. The iron winds of winter blew evilly round the Hall.

Inside the homely Vicarage, Mrs. Beech had long talks with the elder Mr. Charming.

S C E N E 2

I

THE fact of his status as a newcomer helped, making unremarkable his cultivation of the residents, sometimes accompanied and always sponsored by herself; his findings he would recount to her afterwards.

She was to encounter the unexpected, though she convicted herself of unreasonableness in her confidence that he would see eye to eye with her upon such slight acquaintance with the local inhabitants.

He found, for instance, Mrs. Durden quite normal, and her explanation about the hand-bell in her bonnet devoid alike of humour as of pathos. Alison looked at him, dumbfounded. 'But ...'

'It's an instinctive protective reaction of the subconscious, Mrs. Beech. Her psyche needs comforting and her conscious brain secures it for her in a perfectly logical way that is only ridiculous if you consider its objective manifestations. Think of the essential ridiculousness of opening and shutting your mouth on pieces of artificially dead sheep. That's eating, and you do it because your stomach signals your brain that it needs fuel. But suppose you'd

never eaten yourself or seen another eating, wouldn't you laugh? or be amazed? or disgusted? or revolted? Of course you would.'

'It isn't *that*,' stammered his hostess, 'but — how did you know Mrs. Durden rang the bell because she was lonely? I never did.'

'I asked her. She came across quite readily though her speech is confused and her train of thought improperly correlated, as is so often the case in those — particularly women — who live much alone. The only point of interest I found in her as a subject was a good rockbottom paranoia: that is, the desire for some sort of limelight leading to the telling and even believing in them of untruths.'

'But,' almost shouted Alison, 'if I went round asking everyone here why they did the things they do, they wouldn't tell me. Why, I've *tried!* I asked Clorinda where she got hold of that song, *Sandbag Sally*, and she looked astonished and said in her great deep vocie, 'We sing those numbers, you know: we sing them.' *We?*'

'She and her sister, Honourable Thisbe,' elucidated Prince.

'Well . . .' meditated Mrs. Beech, unwillingly.

'You've got t'remember, Mrs. Beech, that to them I'm "a doctor", just any old plug general practitioner, and that's a passport; an' then they know I'm here to-day and gone to-morrow. Most folk'll open up to a visitor where they'll close down on a resident.'

'Ah . . .'

On the other hand, Prince was by no means bedazzled by handsome Jack Durden. 'Him? Huh! Nice looking fellow but a windbag: harmless, but'll never amount to a row of beans on his own account, or I miss my guess.' Alison, her bearings lost, thought 'If Prince takes a liking to Miss Good I'll drop him.' But that refined lady uninterested Mr. Charming most satisfactorily. 'Mighty pleasant,' he diagnosed, 'ought'v'e married, of course. The woods are full of 'em. Show me the girl who goes in for Nature Rambles to this excessive extent and I'll show you a mother thrown away. Tell by the voice. It lacks seduction, Mrs. Beech, because she's never been seduced.'

The Twankeys he found to be (Aladdin) a typical playboy and

(Soshi) a socialite nitwit, though pleasant, too, and the lavishness of their hospitality, no less than the Oriental splendour of their house, produced no effect upon him whatsoever, for he had been several times to Hollywood psycho-analysing film stars and their fans. Thus, his comment upon an At Home given by the Twankeys in honour of his brother and himself, which included a troupe of Chinese acrobats, another of dancers, a third of Japanese sword-swallowers, a conjuror, a Treasure Hunt for prizes of real jewels which the Baron facetiously alluded to as Hammersmiths and Barnets, while ropes of forced wistaria and laburnum were suspended, shuddering with expense, from the gilt and lacquered ceilings, was 'Quite a nice little party, but I think that Chink conjuror, Sham Poo, is English, at least his eyes were. Eurasian, no doubt. These mixed marriages are a big mistake, Mrs. Beech. In our big cities we segregate these aliens in the Chinese quarter.'

About the St. Copes, the baffling Mr. Charming made copious notes which he pondered over when Alison, whose interest in them was slight, was trying to wrench him round to others worthier of his steel. His mind made up after much observation and walking round the couch of the afflicted girl, he fairly pranced one night into the Vicarage.

'It's not coma or syncope,' he called out on the very mat, 'though it's a darned good fake. It's hysteria, and I'm a mutt to've missed it.'

'Then — she'll recover!' enquired Alison, civilly.

He sat down in a long-session manner. 'That girl,' he pronounced, with solemn enthusiasm, 'is her own worst enemy. She's gotten all the symptoms of coma out've pure cussedness due to some frustration, so she's as difficult to rouse as though something *were* wrong with her. A very small thing put me on to it. Lady St. Cope got talking of her and I moved right over to the girl's couch, as it's my theory (with a fifty-five-percentage of successes) that if there's hysteria the subject will react when under discussion.'

'Why?' demanded Mrs. Beech, jealously, 'she didn't react with me.'

'You're not a man. Hysteria is a by-product of sex, Mrs. Beech. And did it answer? I assure you that when I started in talking *that girl opened one eye.*'

'Why not?' bantered Alison, 'you've often made me open both mine!'

'You mean, the psychopathic angle jars your modesty?'

'N-no, I like it, really. It's refreshing, though startling at times. Do go on, Prince.'

'Well, then she closed it. Her eye. An' then I got thinking of what Lady St. Cope told me about none of the fellows making passes at her, and I thought of Zola.'

'Zola?'

'The French author, I mean. He was a novelist,' explained Mr. Charming.

'Thanks. I have heard of him. Even read some of him.'

'No doubt that would be so. He wrote a book called *Lourdes*, very instructive. In it he cited a case of paralysis cured by the miracle of the holy grotto; but because the patient was accustomed to being an invalid her reflexes wouldn't respond because her brain told her she was still paralysed, so she *stayed* paralysed of her own will. Same with this girl. I bet you my last dollar she could wake up if she had a mind to, only she just feels what the hell? so she stays put, and she feels what the hell because her life's bin a disappointment.'

By this time, Mrs. Beech could have roared with boredom, and her 'You'd better give her a kiss, then' was more than a trifle acidulated. And it failed of its intention, for Mr. Charming thought a moment, then said in the tone of one scientist congratulating another, 'That's a very remarkable and helpful idea, Mrs. Beech, and if all else fails, we'll try it.'

But the surprise of the Vicar's wife on finding that Charming could see nothing antick in Mrs. Durden, little to admire in the handsome and gallant Jack, and nothing materially unremarkable in the ménage of the Twankeys, was as nothing to her bedaze-

ment and profound disappointment on receiving his initial impression of her secret protégée, the Baron's youngest daughter.

'Honourable Cinderella? I'll tell you. The girl's a moron, Mrs. Beech. Know what I found her doing? Well, I knew she went in the woods dressed too scanty for this weather fr'm what you told me, and I knew she gathered kindling which ain't right for a member of your aristocracy. Still, times are hard . . . but it wasn't that. Mrs. Beech, that girl was barefoot —.'

'I told you so, Prince!'

'True. But she *has* a pair' ve house shoes: wears 'em in the kitchen. I asked her. Then why don't she have the sense to wear 'em outdoors?'

Again Alison could have shrieked with impotence at the ungrateful confidence to a comparative stranger. 'I asked her why,' he anticipated the maddened Mrs. Beech, 'an' she says that she always goes barefoot in the woods, and looked definitely worried.'

'They do! They do! One asks them a leading question and they look worried, or puzzled, or —'. But Prince wasn't to be sidetracked. 'What got me was the kindling. I assure you that girl'd bin collecting wood on her own admission for two hours, and all she'd got was a bundle the size of a hand telescope. And tied with ribbon. I tell you, the girl's a moron. Just one of these dumb blondes. Not,' concluded Mr. Charming, reddening faintly, 'that she isn't an eyeful, you understand, but just solid wood from the waist up.'

He was more interested in her father, the Baron. 'That man,' he pronounced, 'is living a double life, if I'm not mistaken.' Alison was flippant of disappointment with Mr. Charming's erratic selections and findings, but when to her 'Surely not! With whom?' he gravely elucidated 'I mean, mentally' she forgave, and began to sit up and listen, only to sink back disappointed again at the desiccated items he offered. 'He's one of these professional Good Fellows, as we call 'em back home: one face to the world, another for his family.'

'Oh, I know! Go on, Prince.'

'He's in debt all round, I've found that out already, yet he acts

moneyed. On the other hand, he's no dude. I never saw anything like his clothes, outside of vaudeville, Mrs. Beech. He's very humorous, I hear, and I'm still waiting to laugh against the time when I know more've your local jokes and sporting terms. But I mistrust those eyes; they're too close together — usually means a liar, and untrustworthy. If I was ever in a tight place there's very few people I'd enjoy being not with more than Baron. Not a domestic type, I should judge. Some men should never propagate, Mrs. Beech, they're too unpaternalistic. That *might* account for Honourable Clorinda and Thisbe, though that masculine element in the female is more often traceable to a keen and pre-natal desire on the part've both parents for a son, and vice versa. In the same way I guess Mrs. Durden must have wanted a daughter pretty badly to account for young Jack, and Mr. Twankey's kind of sissy, too, *and* sterile, as you see, though the Princess Soshi seems a healthy enough girl. Why did he marry a coloured girl?

'Swank.'

'Ah. What made her marry him?'

'Money.'

'Oh well, they will do it . . . now this guy, Devlin: he's got the makings of a bad egg.'

'You're telling me, Prince!'

'Yes, I *am* telling you, that's what strikes me as curious. Why don't he come to church, Sundays?'

'Poaching and hunting, I suppose, with Herne.'

'Oh, *that* boob! He's O.K., give him a chance, but Devlin's an atheist, Mrs. Beech. That's why.'

'He's probably swanking, too; that type thinks it rather smart to be agin the Government. They adore labels. He's pro-Nazi too in the same way, but if you ever asked him what even the word Nazi was derived from, he wouldn't know.'

'True enough. At first I thought he might be a devil-worshipper, on the side, but I think, now, he's too darned lazy. Your honest-to-God Satanist is liable to be the restless, nervous type. I've met one or two, *and* a witch. Satanism is still carried on on the quiet in several of the mountain districts of some of the States.'

'Prince! What fun!' exclaimed the Vicar's wife.

'No, I wouldn't say that, but it keeps 'em out've mischief.' Alison laughed aloud. 'You're a dear.'

'It's true,' he smiled at her. 'If you get a lot of villagers raising the devil they've no time for hell-raising — boozing and womanizing, and so on.'

'And the witch? Oh tell about the witch!'

'Her? Silly old dame. Claimed she could ride on a broomstick and showed it to me. I told her she'd make better time in a Ford truck, and offered her a practice flight in our clinic plane. One of the first things we're taught in medical psychology is never to express surprise before exhibitionists. If you treat 'em as though they were normal the odds are they'll turn normal out of disappointment at failing to impress you. Same way when she started throwing her weight about saying she worshipped Beelzebub I said "Mother, I was raised Episcopalian, myself, but I guess God's got room for us all." That threw a man-size jack in her works, and I heard she went right home an' rejoined the Wesleyans. Well, I'll be seeing you. . . .'

III

Mrs. Durden straightened her aching back and decided that, it being no use crying forever over spilt (and lost) milk through the sale of the cow, she had made a good job of the beans given in payment.

Runners. But crawlers when you wanted a meal; and the garden only took a comparative handful of what was in the sack. More land. That was what was needed. And that was what was going to be wanted if this war, already two and a half months old, went on much longer. And with all the men called up . . .

'Land Girl. That's what I mus' turn,' said the widow to three remaining beetroots and one onion. 'Leggings.' She thought, and gibbered a little. 'And britches. Dig For Victory. Would you believe it?' But what work could be done was done, and Mrs. Durden removed her sweet-pea bonnet, substituting for it a small pork-pie hat pierced with a quill pen — the original plume had

perished — which had belonged to her mother, Mrs. Trot, as a bride, assuming another garment trimmed with discoloured wedges of what she would tell you was *real* vermin, and pulling on elastic-sided boots against the chilly air, set forth to the village for gossip, news after her long sequestration in the kitchen garden, and a glass of bass, if the landlord was willing to chalk it up.

Luck was with her, for she ran straight into the Prince who was taking an observant evening stroll upon the Green.

'Well there, your Majesty, fancy meeting you!'

'Try "Prince", Mrs. Durden.'

'Your Principality,' amended the widow, curtseying, 'I hope all the little Principalities are well.'

'Mrs. Durden, get this: I'm not a Royalty at all.'

'Ah, a crook in disguise? Shall I call a policeman? We have one.'

'I mean, my Christian name's Prince.'

'You must excuse me, your Dukedom — Your Ex-Majesty — '

'Charming!' patiently declaimed that gentleman, 'I'm Charming.'

'And I'm a perfect marvel in a thick fog,' answered Mrs. Durden, clapping her hand to her mouth and screwing archly round upon one elastic-sided boot, 'you mustn't mind me, young man. When they educated me I wasn't listening.'

It was at this conversational impasse that Mrs. Beech, returning from a choir practice of carols, saw and joined the couple. Greetings exchanged, Mr. Charming remarked, 'Well, Mrs. Durden, my brother and I are giving a party to the neighbours at Christmas and we shall hope to see you there.'

'A party! A party! Aw, I love a party,' exclaimed the widow. 'I remember when Durden died we had cold ham and faggots, and I can never look at his picture now without thinking of pork.' Shivering a little at a sudden small wind which blew across the Green, Mrs. Durden resourcefully *thk'd* up a grazing horse and warfed her hands upon its forehead.

'Ask her about the cow,' muttered Alison urgently in the ear of Mr. Charming. Uncomprehending, yet keeping a poker face, he took his cue. 'Well, that's great, you'll get your invitation in due course. I was very sorry, Mrs. Durden, to hear about the poor old cow.'

'Let's hope she's gone to a real good home.' But to the watchful Alison this failed of its purpose: for Mrs. Durden neither evaded nor relapsed into normality — some reassuringly tangible expression of grief, but answered quite maddeningly, 'Ah, milk's off the cow-pon, but what I say is, vegetables is on. What comes up if you plant it? Food. What comes up if it disagrees with you? Foo — that reminds me of what Durden said when I gave him his last half-yard of tripe. "Euthanasia," he said, "tell me before we part forever what are you giving me for my dinner?" "It's tripe, love," I says. "It tastes odd to me," he says, and eats it up, and it wasn't until he was gone that I missed the bath-mat.'

'Paranoia,' murmured Mr. Charming, enthralled at such a ripe and perfect example, 'you see? That tendency to aggrandize names: "Euthanasia" for "Emma" . . .' But Mrs. Beech's frustration was also of a ripe and perfect nature, and she fairly tweaked him away, leaving Mrs. Durden happily in full spate to a growing audience of welcoming cronies whose pleasure at regaining her was such that they competed for the privilege of standing her half-quarters in The Pig in a Poke, with the result: two hours later the damaged widow lurched uphill to her cottage, describing with her boots as she went many an embryo proposition in geometry, and arriving at her gate, was so exhilarated by her successful evening and her invitation to the Prince's party that the erstwhile problem of how to dispose of the surplus beans through lack of ground faded into a rosy, muddly distance, and her feats in The Pig in a Poke lowered a safety curtain like warm asbestos between her and the recent worry and anxiety they had caused. She sang:

If they say you're a wee bit squiffy
Sing these lines with me,
For they'll put you right in half a jiffy
As you'll very quickly see.

She sells sea-shells in a fresh fried fish shop
An anemone's an enemy to me,
I sniff shop snuff in a proper copper pot
Aluminium-ing it, Mum, as you see.

I'm a critic of cricket, what annoys a noisy oyster most?
That the switch which Ipswich switched to Swindon's screwed,
If you can't sing this with me, girls,
After going on the spree, girls,
I have only one remark to make: *You're stewed.*

Having navigated the chorus with an ease which appeared to surprise her no less than it would have a listener, she was impelled to dance. And here again her performance (for one in her condition, or even out of it) was remarkable: for setting down her umbrella upon the arm of the nearest scarecrow, she executed at top speed what a ballet master would have instantly recognized and applauded as those tricky evolutions and revolutions known respectively as *coupés jetés en tournant* and *tir-bouchons*, in the latter of which one leg is wildly revolved from the knee like the handle of a piano organ.

Appeased (unlike Hitler) by this exercise, she perceived that the whirling universe was very obligingly slowing down on its own account, she having revolved in a counter-direction, and it came to her that all this digging and planting and fuss about a bag of measly beans was unworthy of any self-respecting woman's consideration, especially of one who had invitations from Princes, and that gardening, so to speak, was beneath her. The late widow Twankey had got ahead through luck and money and Uncle Lemonsqueezer, but she, Emma Durden, was getting somewhere by hobnobbing with the nobs, and it was an insult to the company one was going to mix with to keep all on messing about with a bag of bursting blasted beans.

This revelation vouchsafed, she fell into her cottage, hauled the sack of beans outside her gate, and doubly intoxicated now by excitement, broadcast them in handfuls in every direction until the sack was empty. Half descended upon an abandoned allotment whose owner had been called up, and the rest showered into the field where once the placid Buttercup had grazed. Mrs. Durden's valedictory 'There goes the last of you an' I hope you give the sparrows a stomachache' shouted to a silent, moon-drenched world, she literally tumbled into bed.

S C E N E 3

I

TRUE to his undertaking, the elder Mr. Charming drove to the Vicarage on the morning following the sandwich and cocoa conversation after the concert. He hoped as he drew up at the porch that Mrs. Beech might prove to have something worth diagnosing the matter with her, but doubted it. It was probably nothing more than the usual business of being married to the wrong man, or sick of the parish.

He and she faced each other in arm-chairs: the Vicar was out on his pastoral rounds and save for sundry clatterings from the kitchen and the faint and intermittent sounds of young voices raised in song from a room overhead they had the place to themselves.

He offered his cigarette case. ‘Now then, shoot, Mrs. Beech. Wait. Don’t hesitate. Tell me as it occurs to you what’s in your mind, I can undertake the piecing together.’

‘You won’t give up if I’m a bit preposterous?’

‘There’s actually no such condition, because it’s all relative,’ he assured her, ‘my hat’s preposterous to a Central African pygmy but it ain’t to you.’

She smiled, and settled, and thought, and shot at him, ‘Would you say that I’m here? I mean, am I perhaps sleep-walking and going to wake up in some bedroom I shall remember?’

He shook his head. ‘No, because you’d be walking in *my* sleep, too, and I know I’m awake and that we’re pursuin’ the same waking sequence. There is a test — writing messages to each other and keeping them twenty-four hours — but we needn’t pursue that.’

‘Then, on the same principle, the village is actual, and it’s not only *me* seeing it?’

‘Sure. Though there are many known cases of houses and villages that weren’t there when people returned next day to locate ’em. It’s the time-theory business working, maybe, or simply that certain places now no longer existent choose the subjects they’ll reappear to.’

Her face transformed with pleasure. ‘*You* believe that can happen?’

'Mrs. Beech, I know we psychiatrists an' neuropaths are looked on as midway between the sanity've a doctor an' the cussedness of a crank. But though we don't claim to know it all we're willing to learn, and in the last five years we've established and endowed a Chair of Psychics, and a mighty interesting study it is. Now, we can cut this idea of yours about Daisydown right out; the evidence for its being actual and here is too strong: I've seen it, Earle's seen it —'

'Yes, but you two might be chosen — selected — to see it, as I've been.'

'That's possible, but stretching coincidence a bit far, surely? I'd give you in Earle an' me as we've a blood tie that might operate for clairvoyance, but what about Henrico, my assistant? He sees it too, and your husband as well. By the way, does Mr. Beech understand your difficulty? I'm speaking as a medico.'

'No.'

'Ah.'

'But, Prince, he thinks some of the people here quite incredible, too,' urged Alison, loyally anxious.

'But in a physical way?'

'Yes. You see, it's his job to understand 'em.'

Mr. Charming nodded briefly. 'What comes next?'

'Well . . . would you say that the villagers are real people? Can I possibly have invented, say, Clorinda and Mrs. Durden in a humorous moment? They're the kind of characters one so easily *might* have imagined.'

'I can't figure inventin' either of 'em,' he grinned. 'Pardon me, but did you ever wish very urgently for children of your own?'

'No, Prince, I can't say I did, much. I'm too generally interested in life to need to cramp myself into a personal relationship of that kind. Am I being unnatural, or anything that ought to be put on a sofa and analysed?'

'No, only-honest. I asked because we've found in a large number've cases that the creation of imaginary characters is sublimation — the subject finding vent for thwarted maternity in devising the kind of tale she'd tell her family if she had one, though it's

often symptomatic of nothing but a sense of fun operatin' when things are flopping a bit. You're not asleep an' the village an' folks in it are real. What's your snag?

'Prince . . . you say the Baron's leading a double life. I believe they *all* are. They know something we aren't allowed to. They do things when we come on the scene that are different from what they do when they're alone, or we've cleared off. They're trying, in a way, to adapt themselves to *us*, and yet they don't know why they're doing it. And through it all they trip you up by being normal when you expect them to go on being crazy . . . You know Mrs. Durden. I go to tea with her. She was, I knew, in trouble. I'd seen Jack going off as I know now to sell their cow, yet the moment he saw me, he put on another face and sang a sentimental song. And Mrs. Durden had a perfectly sane tea-table. That fuddled me. I'm always being befuddled that way. Then, there's Clorinda and her song, *Sandbag Sally*, and saying "We sing them, you know". It was as though she knew why she sang those songs but had forgotten. Unless she was hoodwinking me . . . Take Cinderella and her shoes. She admitted to you she had a pair but goes barefoot in the woods. Is *she* following some instinct, too?'

'Race memory? Atavism?'

'Yes, something of the sort.'

'Go on,' he ordered, with the rudeness of complete absorption.

'Then there's Cinderella's cat. I don't believe you'll laugh, but he's in it somehow, too. He — he behaved to me the last time I called as though he was playing a part and had forgotten the next stage direction and "business". Do I sound insane?'

'Go right ahead.'

'Prince, that cat . . . do you believe in reincarnation?'

'It covers a lot've apparent injustices and inequalities in this world if you can credit that in a former or future visit to earth the subject's given a second deal.'

'Well, I think that cat's one,' said Alison vaguely, 'he's been a person, and fairly recently.'

'Fair enough. What made you think so?'

She hesitated. 'Because he opens doors,' she blurted.

'He's a remarkably large animal, an' they do, you know.'

'And then, he found a fish on the floor and brought it to me. Prince, it wasn't a real one. It was canvas, painted.'

'Huh? My kid nephew has a rubber one. Plays with it in his bath.'

'Umm... but I got the impression that he was trying to bluff me into mistaking him for a cat —'

'You mean the canvas fish was a stage property?'

'Exactly! But — that doesn't square with his opening the door to me.'

'It could, Mrs. Beech. If he's what you think, a human in cat shape reincarnated on a lower plane, he'd have enough hangover of brains to realize that you'd know some cats can open doors, so that his action in opening the door wasn't a giveaway.'

'Yes, that's what he thought, I'm certain... And that's the sort of thing I come up against every now and again.'

'It amounts to this, then: these people are playing a scene, as you put it, and are put off their stroke when you appear, or they resume it in a hurry, an' yet when they act like ordinary folk it strikes you as even more abnormal.'

'Yes, oh yes!'

He tapped his glasses with his thumbnail. 'Well... gosh... I'm darned. You know, I'd no notion it was that side of things in question, Mrs. Beech. Had I guessed, I'd've attacked the whole've this place from an entirely different angle from the start. As it was, I just saw all the locals you drew my attention to as possible cases — just routine types of aberration, you understand.'

'Yes, and you disappointed me.'

'You bet. I've disappointed myself. Any more?'

'Lots of little things. There's my young nephew and niece, for instance. I believe they're caught, as well.'

'By coming here?'

'Possibly. What d'you make of 'em, Prince?'

'They're well-grown healthy youngsters. Bit exhibitionist, but nothing to worry over. Lots've kids show off. Foolish mother, perhaps.'

Alison grinned faintly. 'Quite. My sister.'

'Oh, you've got to excuse me!'

'No. From now on, Prince, you and I excuse each other nothing! And you can call me Alison if you like.'

'Thanks a lot, Alison. I'd value that. What's your complex with the children?'

'That they're artificial. That they're somehow dropping into some place or niche that was ready for them here in Daisydown — I can't explain.'

'You mean, the influence of the place is too strong for 'em to fight against?'

'Probably. I'm not even quite convinced,' said Alison, incredibly, 'that Derek is a boy.'

Mr. Charming was unshaken. 'I'll undress him and give him the once-over.'

'Oh, he must be, or Mabel — my sister — would have said something,' faltered Alison.

'Ever seen him in his bath?'

'No, he's too tall,' she flushed involuntarily, 'and yet he's a frightful coward in some ways, Prince.'

'List them, please.'

'He combines being a child going through the valiant-small-boy stage with a fear of Devlin that is perfectly ridiculous.'

'Girl afraid of him too?'

'Yes. But there again, with both of them one feels that this tiresome shrinking and exaggerated fear is more for the look of the thing.'

'Has this fellow any grudge against the children?'

'None that I'm aware of, they've only been with me three weeks.'

'Has he a previous record of assaults against children?'

'Oh good gracious no!'

'Does he show animosity towards them, or to your two in particular?'

'No. His manner's always surly and rather threatening, and he looks very black when we all pass him. Oh, and he made rather an extraordinary scene outside our morning-room window about a

month ago. It seemed to be a general tirade against Miss Good. It almost made me like him! She is such a womanly woman! She's the type who'd do you a kindness however much you struggled. She made him sign the pledge.'

'Which one?' Oh, I get you. Go on the water-wagon. Well, that don't strike me as a kindness!'

'Oh, and then she and Devlin had a row in a field as I was going by on my bicycle to tea with Mrs. Durden. He's got some down on the Durdens and she was standing up for them—oh always The Perfect Lady, but she seemed really roused. And then, it may have been my mistake, but I've an idea that Devlin threw his scythe at me.'

'At you? At her, surely?'

'No. Me. (I never told my husband, so please don't either.) Later, at tea, I tackled Mrs. Durden about Cinderella and her ill-treatment at the Hall, and she hedged, and looked worried and puzzled as well, as though I'd been playing a part with her and had asked her a question that wasn't in the script . . . just as Clorinda did about the song and Cinderella did about the shoes, and the cat —.'

'Alison, when did you first get wise to all this sort of thing?'

She considered. 'I've lived here three years, now —'

'A Londoner originally?'

'Oh yes. Very Thurloe Square.'

'So you saw the whole place with new eyes, city eyes. Go right on.'

'For months I thought Daisydown a huge joke. It still is to me, here and there. But if once you begin to add two and two together you see differently from then on. It began with the Hall, and the Baron's family. All I sensed at first was that Clorinda and Thisbe were pathetic, under all their foolery. And gradually I saw how terribly different they are from the rest of the "funny" people like the Twankeys and Mrs. Durden. I began to feel that the reason is that the kind of unease and even cruelty which I'm sure goes on at the Hall is of all time — eternal —, concealed in heaps of respected households all over England, whereas the foolery of a Durden is only sporadic and individual. So that whether the Baron's family are

real or imaginary people they're awful, and whatever conclusion one arrives at about them as a problem they're essentially insoluble. They alone upset the balance, even if I do turn out to have invented Mrs. Durden and the Twankeys and all the rest. . . .

'Mightn't that thought be a relief, Alison?'

'You mean, that the Baron's family are outside my control, too strong for me, so that I'm not responsible? Yes, it is a relief in a way.'

'They're static in a population of anticks.'

'You *do* understand, Prince.'

As once before, he reddened with pleasure. 'But they're antick, too, we mustn't lose sight of that,' she concluded.

'So what? As far's I can see there's nothing to be done but watch 'em, particularly the folks at the Hall, and get together every so often to pool our findings, if any. You know, Alison, this is all being rather like cancer research: we can't cure it yet because we don't know what we're lookin' for and might miss it if we found it.'

'Suppose I *have* found it, and let it go?'

For the time they also let it go at that.

S C E N E 4

I

BUT if the winter winds blew shrewdly round the village, causing Sir Francis Poynter to look apprehensive at the first sniff of frost as he haunted stables and kennels — on those mornings the M.F.H. stated briefly over the breakfast table that the Almighty was no sportsman, if Mrs. Durden was ever more hard put to it for warmth in her cottage, and Herne and Devlin, *faut de mieux*, consumed more tea and cocoa than ever over alfresco fires: if Derek and Doris built a snow man on the Vicarage lawn to which they quaintly composed a little song ('Dear Mister Snow Man, I Know You're A No-man, But Come Alive, Come Alive Do!' which they sang

even about the house to the mounting fury of their aunt:) if the Vicar returned soggier about the trouser-cuffs and looking more like Savonarola than ever with the dint of pastoral conscientiousness, and Lady St. Cope was driven nearly mad by the domestic problem at Dormer Grange, and Robin Hood returned from one of those Continental campaigns against Germany in which every side but the wrong one retreated gloriously to stronger positions in the nearest vehicle bound for England, to the delight of the Beech's maid, Marian: and if the Princess Soshi in a fervour of adopted patriotism started to sew for the still non-existent wounded, and, racial custom being too strong, turned out nothing but kimonos, sarongs and loin-cloths embellished with fringes and dragons in gold thread, the forest remained a sheltered place, so thickly did the boughs meet and interlace overhead in certain stretches. And here (failing more poetic description) still gathered its regulars: Herne, Devlin, Derek, Doris, and the Baron's wood-gathering youngest daughter, to say nothing of the Baron, and party, what time the spirit moved him to take gun and hamper and make a day of it.

Here as well was even occasionally to be encountered the nature-loving Miss Queenie Good who, wrapped in an enveloping cloak with hood against the chill, pure air (she often said that she always said it made her look like an old witch, with a merry laugh) would saunter the glades and even gather a twig or two if what remained upon it seemed to resemble anything botanic and teachable to the dear children. Sometimes she and Cinderella would come upon each other, and sit on felled trunks and talk, and on one occasion, which made Miss Good laugh more merrily than ever before hurrying home to have a prolonged and slightly harassed look in her mirror, Cinderella had momentarily mistaken her for a genuine old woman and solicitously armed her to a log, upon which the presumptive crone cast her cloak very quickly indeed, exclaiming 'Cuckoo! Who's this?' And they shared Cinderella's scanty luncheon of stale remnants of one of her father's opulent picnics, and Cinderella, concerned about the smallness of Miss Good's bundle of twigs which was even more exiguous than her own, had actually offered

to collect wood for both, which struck Miss Good, who owned an excellent gas-stove, as so touching that she was almost in genuine tears and they became firmer friends then ever.

II

On one particular late afternoon the elder Mr. Charming was in the forest on his own account: peaceful, contented but alert, he patrolled the natural avenues and rides.

It was true that Honourable Cinderella was a moron, but in the light of Alison's apprehensions it placed the girl in a more interesting class, and of course one couldn't stand for any hint of cruelty, and that golden head glimpsed among the trees would be a real artistic treat . . . the wood was kind of picturesque, too, though not one-two-three on Yellowstone or even Gramercy Park.

The sun was setting, he judged, from a change in the quality of what light penetrated the forest, and he idly noted the curious effect made upon the giant beeches, chestnuts and saplings, as though the trunks and branches were cut in profile out of canvas . . . they even, to his suddenly prejudiced sight, appeared to sway a little outwards, like scenery in some sudden draught, and on impulse, for the first time remotely apprehensive, he approached a tree and struck it with the flat of his hand and recoiled, staring. For at that second of impact it gave, swaying inwards. He struck again in self-derision, and the bark was firm to his blow, grazing his knuckles. And standing there, incredulous, nursing his hand, an impossible thought came to him and he spoke it aloud to the silence.

'Am I in it too, Alison?'

III

Round the next bend had he but known it a discussion was going on which would have interested him considerably, but it was one of those conversations which nobody but the persons in question has ever heard or guessed.

Devlin, full of spleen, considerably enlarged by tea, for he was out of funds and his illicit quarry safe underground in their burrows, was pondering his plan, never abandoned, of revenge upon the Vicar's nephew and niece. Kidnapping was for those with a car and money and a town accomplice, his resentment stopped short of murder — no kid was worth that, not even with that pindling fool, Good, thrown in. Or Mrs. Beech, though to be hung for four at once wouldn't half be jam for the local paper. Nor, sensibly considered, could one lure the kids away, they knew the forest pretty well by now, and if they did get lost for a bit some meddling fool would find 'em. Children was the most difficult things in the world to lose, *and* the easiest to get.

Blast 'em.

But he might bully 'em up a bit, give 'em something to squall about, with their 'Oh the wicked, wicked man!'

Dammitall.

Get the boy to climb a tree and leave him stranded for a few hours, or tip him off it sudden. Or have a go at the girl.

But even Devlin turned from this sentimental diversion. She just looked rather like one of those and wasn't . . . so you were had both ways. She looked as though she'd enjoy it, and then where were you? Before the Bench.

'My belief she uses lipstick,' rumbled Devlin to one dejected Jay and a robin with a withered leaf in its beak. Apparently the robin was equally shocked, for, dropping the leaf, it primped hastily away.

'And if I was 'er Ma I'd learn 'er,' concluded Devlin, which finished off the Jay as well, leaving the disillusioned speaker *enfin seul*. But the sound of childish voices ('Oh come *on* Doris, you dawdle so') promised him imminent company, however uncongenial. Still, the idea *might* come to him once the kids appeared: that is, if Mrs. Beech wasn't along too. Or that Good woman.

But as the children straggled into sight a thing happened which at first view and hearing seemed to the watcher wholly admirable and to be envied. It was later, over the months, long after they had returned to London, that something told Devlin that the happening was also singular, and set some deep-buried memory, almost lost

in the mists of time, to working foggily within him: or was it some hearsay of his father or *his* father? . . .

The children advanced — that spectacle began the mental groping for some evasive familiarity — in their matching suits: dark blue velvet with cut-steel buttons, to-day, and it was then that the boy slapped his sister, a well-aimed, nicely-balanced slap. A stinger. Upon which she plunged her hands into his over-luxuriant curls and pulled them, hard, just like a couple of kids, thought Devlin, not realizing then how strange this was to seem. And then they saw himself.

At least he was prepared for their discomfiture. But Derek merely said 'Hullo, Mr. Devlin'. Polite, that. 'D'you mind if we sit by you a bit?' The girl eyed the kettle and tea-cup longingly.

'Lost, eh?' commented Devlin at random (and they *were* alone). 'No, only came too far.'

Devlin was flummoxed. 'Oh . . .' he hauled up from his unready recesses, 'so I'm not a wicked man this arternune?' And watched their faces. Derek and Doris looked confused, or was it puzzled?

'Wicked, Mr. Devlin?' queried the girl.

'Your name for me, Missy, not mine. *And* his,' and Devlin indicated Derek with a jerk of the thumb.

'But — we don't think you are, Mr. Devlin, we think you must have jolly good fun, eating all over the place and nobody to tell you not to drink out of the saucer because only cats do.'

'Oo tells you that?' temporized Devlin, 'y'auntie?'

'No, Miss Matcham, my governess. We never do it at aunt Alison's.'

'I say, nor we do,' remarked her brother, looking surprised.

'On y'best behaviour at the Vicarage, eh?'

'I suppose so,' brother and sister replied vaguely.

Devlin groped groggily. 'Why d'yer hit y'sister?'

'Because she wouldn't buck up and we'll be late for supper and I'm hungry and our aunt doesn't like me not to bring her home myself,' answered the boy promptly, 'it's frightful rot, really, Mr. Devlin, girls having to be looked after when they can do it for themselves just as well.'

'Well, you don't look as though you c'd say Bo to a goose y'rself, young shaver.'

The boy reddened with anger. 'I'll kick you if you talk like that,' he spluttered.

'Come on, Curlylocks!'

Derek came on. Ineffectually punching and butting, he fixed his admirable teeth in Devlin's wrist while Doris prudently emptied the remains of the pipkin over his trousers.

'Here, dammit!' expostulated Devlin, between astonishment and slight pain.

'It's our clothes,' panted Derek, 'mother makes us wear them like this.' And then he said an odd thing, which, mopping his garments, evaded Devlin. '*I've just remembered how I hate them.*'

The girl stood, staring, scared and silent. Then she stammered, 'Did I hate them too . . . in London? I can't remember. I never thought about them since we came to Daisydown.'

Derek considered, still panting a little. 'I don't know. Nobody notices 'em, *here*.'

The incalculable Mr. Devlin broke in. 'Oh, let bygones be bygones. Siddown. But there ain't no tea left. It's all on me.' They sat in a dishevelled group. Doris's hair had come out of curl, her hands were smudged from the pipkin, and Derek's immaculate suit was covered with fallen leaves.

I V

And then, the wood seemed to fill with people: for Mrs. Beech arrived from one direction, Mr. Charming from another, and Miss Good from heaven really only knows where.

It was Alison who saw the seated group first, Prince who took it in a split second later, she who signalled him to concealment, for her conventional concern for the safety of nephew and niece was quite outswamped by the instinct of the sleuth. And Prince was at hand. If Devlin *did* hit one or both of them it would be quite heavenly, thought their aunt.

Miss Good, however, got her blow in first, advancing rapidly.

'Devlin! what are you thinking of?'

'That's all right, Miss. We're getting along fine.'

'Mr. Devlin's telling us how to skin a rabbit, Miss Queenie. It sounds simply frightful. It's full of streamers and things like they throw away at carnivals,' began Doris.

'That's entrails and guts, you duffer,' cut in Derek.

'Children! How can you be so disgusting! You oughtn't to *hear* such words. I'm ashamed of you, Devlin, for using them.'

'Oh, come off it, Miss!'

At that moment, Mrs. Beech unfortunately giggled, and seeing the attention of all caught by the sound, disclosed herself as nonchalantly as might be. And then something else happened which her outer ear faithfully registered for future use, her immediate perception not at all.

Miss Good, gliding forward, remarked, 'It's not too late, for, evil power braved, once more two helpless innocents are saved from future harm: when they shall roam the wood ill-will shall falter when defying good.'

'Well, gosh . . .' murmured Mr. Charming from behind his tree. And peered again upon the scene.

At sight of their aunt the children sprang forward, clinging to her. 'Now what's the matter?' she demanded, resigned, as she picked off their hands like starfish from a rock.

'Oh auntie, the bad man! He almost caught us, and then *you* came, and dear Miss Queenie — '

'Why, you blooming little liar!' roared Devlin, outraged. For by this time both the children were looking like the wreck of the Hesperus and it was his word, a bad asset, against theirs if trouble started. But he was overthrown anew, for the Vicar's wife answered quite pleasantly, 'That's all right, it's quite a pleasure to see them looking untidy.'

'I, as the guardian of these helpless babes — ' began Miss Good.

'Oh no, they have a father *and* mother,' said Mrs. Beech crisply, 'and in any case, I, as their aunt — '

Miss Good smiled forgivably. 'A mother's care when once by chance removed leaves to my care the fate of those she loved,' she said.

Mrs. Beech was tired, hungry, and already put out with the children's unpunctuality. For the first time she lost her temper.

'My dear lady, forgive me, but who *do* you think you are?' she snapped.

'I am the spirit of all kindness, waiting to serve and save those in distress,' smiled back Miss Good.

'Well . . . thunder . . . that dame's sure got an ace-high opinion've herself,' thought Mr. Charming, and emerged. Alison, the whole business beyond her, leant against a tree.

It seemed to her that the children greeted him with less than their usual certainty and confounded charm, as though for a moment they were at a social loss very unlike them, she would admit, and which made them for once seem more like authentic children.

She roused herself; it was past the time for tired Arthur's evening meal. She noted with relief and adulterated fury that Miss Good was already officially shepherding Derek and Doris homewards and she and Mr. Charming closed in behind, tacitly, wordlessly, deliberately lagging.

v

Prince gleamed at her through his horn-rims. 'So what?'

'H'm.'

'I see what you mean about the youngsters, Alison. Their game's a plant, all right, all that hooey about bein' scared stiff of that fellow. And yet — '

'— they don't consciously know that they're putting it on. I wouldn't say that they aren't genuinely scared, at times. Is there such a thing as split personality, Prince? Medically, I mean.'

'Oh yes, sure.'

'Well, I think the children are cases of split motive.'

'Possible yes, possible. But what's it all date from? Where's your root cause?' He thought, and whistled sizzlingly through his teeth. She said, 'I've got an idea that if *we* weren't here they and Devlin would have come to some conclusion, worked out whatever it is they're trying on or down for. But when you get two sane

people like ourselves butting in *outside the story* . . . d'you see what I mean?'

'Yes and no.' He looked faintly harassed and she noted it instantly. 'Prince! you've found something!' He hesitated before deciding for frankness. 'I don't know, Alison. You see, this type of stuff's a bit out of my depth —'

'— But?'

'But this very evening I was walking around and thinking of this an' that' — he flushed slightly, she observed with a dim apprehension — 'matter've fact I was thinking of Honourable Cinderella and what you tell me of the girl's home life, and then something made me think the whole wood looked kind of cockeye'd and I punched a tree to test it out. And it *bent*, Alison, like it was canvas or battens.' Almost as dismayed by her obvious dismay he hurriedly concluded, 'So I tried again. Trunk as firm as a rock. Anything to suggest?' She shook her head, open-mouthed, wide-eye'd, suddenly and infinitely dejected. Then she asked dully, 'Prince, is this your first visit to Daisydown?'

'Why, Alison, sure it is; I'm American born and bred, though we do have English ancestry on my mother's side. We date right back to Henry The Seventh. My ancestors came from this part of England.'

She thought and shook her head and moved slowly on. He was brisk of some undefined embarrassment. 'Now, 'bout Devlin and the children and that Miss Good. Anything for us there?'

'They only began to show fear of him when we appeared, and — she paused, struggling with unwillingness — 'they weren't the same to you as usual. More awkward, less *glib* and pretty.'

'Yes . . . yes . . . and you deduce, what?'

'That for the first time they sensed a common tie with you. That you ceased to be audience and for the moment joined in too, and somehow became part of *their* plan.'

They looked at each other while the sun set below the now abandoned forest. He nodded briefly.

'That's probably excellent work, Alison, but you've missed one thing. Miss Good.'

'Oh lor, that woman!'

'When we arrived (practically together, remember) she was what you'd call pitching into this Devlin — we call it laying him out stinking. But moment she saw you she commenced talking kind of dumb,' argued Mr. Charming with a delirious lack of consistence to any listener unfamiliar with the American idiom for any unconventional, and therefore ridiculous, locution. 'I can't place it, but it listened like nonsense to *me*. Does she or anyone else act up that way?'

'N-no, they're rather dramatic and vehement sometimes, rural people are, you know. Every village in England has its own words and phrases. It's part of what tourists pay for.'

'Yes but gosh! this wasn't that sort've thing.'

'I suppose I'm used to them,' she apologized for failing over this trifle the secret firm that was hers and his.

'Well, I'm not, and I'd say she talked dumb,' answered Charming doggedly, 'and different to us to what she talked to Devlin. You say yourself that pup, Durden, put on an entirely different expression when he met you out with the cow. There may be some connection there. And you say these folks are normal, times, and then act up. There, again. You admitted once you've a hunch they're quite different when they're alone together and I'm beginning to see it for myself. That's something. I wonder —' he took out a small cigar and lit it and thought again. 'I've a notion that we might call their bluff and watch the reaction.'

'How?'

'Try an' talk dumb, too.'

'Oh for heaven's sake, Prince! *I've* a reputation to lose. *I am* the Vicar's wife, you know.' He was concentrating too hard to smile. 'Trouble is, I don't see my way to it. As far's I've heard, they seem to only do it in argument: the man kind of blusters an' threatens and Miss Good comes right back how she's the cat's whiskers with Providence and God's second wife and out t'give creation the glad hand, and all this an' that. That woman needs a repressive course. If she was an automobile I'd say her spark wanted retarding.'

Mrs. Beech burst into hopeless screams of laughter. He kindly

let her void herself and then propelled her downhill to the Green. Their way led past the Durden's cottage. In the failing, ultramarine light, a silhouette, corkscrew-curled and gigantically bonneted, was visible at the gate. Mrs. Durden, smiling at the maiden moon with a sentimentality that sat strangely upon her determined features, was taking the evening air.

'Let's try her out,' Charming announced, 'you care to start? Well, can't say I blame you. That looks like it'll be me.' He advanced, his fulminatory admonishment considerably impaired no less by his native courtesy which caused the raising of his hat than by a knowledge, all too sketchy, of the Devlin mode of verbal attack when talking dumb.

'Know,' said Mr. Charming sternly raising his hat, to the attentive figure, 'that much danger lies around here and that — oh thunder — evil powers are loose this night. And wicked men —'

Mrs. Durden brightened and leant her arms on the gate, looking fondly at the speaker.

'And wicked men —'

'Not a hope, your Highness,' she answered, 'it may have bin true once, but I was twenty-five years younger then, and there wasn't even a war on, I give you *my* word. But now! what d'you get now? Why, any girl that has even half a face can lose her bearings in the black-out!'

'I pass,' muttered the damaged Mr. Charming. He once more propelled the stricken Mrs. Beech, weeping of fresh amusement, on to the Green, while the faint, valedictory tinkle of a handbell came from the direction of the Durden cottage.

They stood about. Presently a private car nosed slowly past the line of little shops. Mr. Charming advanced but Alison rescued him in time. 'That's Sir Francis Poynter,' she hissed, 'he's sane, and I'll only think you're mad.' Presently Lady St. Cope emerged from a lane and made her way home towards Dormer Grange. Once more Alison plucked her companion to last-minute safety. 'I'm not sure about her: I *think* she's one of us, too, except for Miss St. Cope, of course —'

'She's only hysterical, I've told you,' began Prince. But they let

the dignified figure proceed on her way to be on the safe side. Lights twinkled in cottage and shop: the Inn was aglow, the street empty of passers-by. It looked as though the luck of the watchful couple was out, until a solitary wayfarer came into sight, the Baron's younger daughter, Clorinda, in her conception of shooting kit, and carrying a stuffed parrot in a cage, which, catching sight of the couple, she brandished at them, remarking with strident facetiousness, 'I've got the bird!' Mrs. Beech swallowed valiantly, and spake.

'Those who destroy, themselves shall be destroyed,' she began, 'and all your schemings come to nothingness.'

The Honourable Clorinda looked humorous and civil. 'Have you the headache, dear?' she enquired deeply, 'I always find Aspro most helpful As Producing a soothing effect.' With despair the Vicar's wife recognized that the Honourable Clorinda was behaving in a perfectly normal manner, even the parrot and Aspro pun was the kind of Third Form stuff that ordinary people might be tempted to emit on meeting an old acquaintance. Meanwhile the Honourable Clorinda's dark eyes were fixed upon Mr. Charming, and she said to him, low-voiced, 'Don't forget to-morrow'.

'Delighted,' he answered, 'tea at four, I think you said.'

'Yes, yes, tea at four, but for two I hope,' murmured that lady, looking quite extraordinarily lean and more like a *passé*-male matinée idol than ever, with her undoubtedly fine eyes and improbable hair, an effect which she possibly realized, for she certainly gave Mr. Charming an indisputable Glad Eye.

It was then that an incident occurred which, discussing the whole evening later, he and Alison admitted was of a more than usually baffling nature, and which got them no further than feeling that they might for a brief space have held an isolated clue in their hand. Clorinda strode off, and almost instantly her elder, Thisbe, hove into sight. Mrs. Beech (they threshed it out afterwards) said 'Good evening, I believe you have met Mr. Charming and his brother. Mr. Prince Charming,' and to him, 'We must get on, dinner's already late and Arthur will be in a fearful state' — and paused, arrested at the dawning expression of horror, as of an awakening to

disaster, upon the rotund visage of the ugly woman facing them. Saying not a word in greeting, comment or farewell, Thisbe almost ran along the street.

V I

'And now what?' queried Prince, confounded.

Alison gazing, shrugged absently. 'That woman was scared, Alison, I know fear when I see it. But what have we done? We didn't even say anything . . . did I forget to bow or take off my hat?' 'No.'

He worried, "Tisn't even as though I knew her well enough to have offended her some way, I guess I've seen more've Honourable Clorinda —'

'I should have gathered that,' Alison responded dryly, and repented instantly as Charming turned upon her his direct, dispassionate regard. 'You mean she likes makin' dates with me,' he stated: 'that's purely symptomatic and in a normal way not to be encouraged. It over-excites the subject. But I date up with her by reason I want to get all the information I can out've that family in view of all you tell me.' He walked on. 'What beats me, Alison, is that Honourable Thisbe. I mean, I didn't say a thing. Why, the only times I've seen her she didn't seem like she could get Earle an' me sorted — pardon?' For Mrs. Beech had given a sudden *Oh*, as of one unexpectedly and unpleasantly enlightened.

'You mean that she doesn't know you and Earle apart, or has never heard your Christian name?' she rapped.

'That's probable. I've noticed that over here you aren't so free with names as we are. In America I'd be "Prince" to the bunch in ten minutes, but you introduce me as "Mr. Charming" and only Earle by his given name.' Mrs. Beech agreed, and looked disproportionately harassed, which he attributed to any cause but the right one. At the gates of the Vicarage she appeared to struggle for speech, then, abandoning it, turned and hurried up the drive.

Clorinda was already within doors. The great kitchen of the Hall was to her swelling mood, abominably, outrageously, unbearably full. Thisbe was imminent, the Page in and out bringing wood and pails of water, Cinderella was at the range heatedly dishing up: on a settle lounged their father reading a sporting paper, at the immense table in the centre of the room the two broker's men, their game of darts over, played cards with a greasy pack.

The soul of Clorinda cried aloud for privacy — privacy with warmth, a thing difficult to come by in that huge place. She and Thisbe had long occupied separate bedrooms, secretly working out that dreary sum in domestic arithmetic which amounted to the relative advantages of fire and rows or icy cold and sole possession, and in the unhappy conflict sole possession won. There were limits — even the sisters saw it — to what can be exacted of a servant-sister and one youth, financially your creditor.

Clorinda flung down the parrot in its cage — she had been fond of the bird though its care devolved upon Cinderella, and the taxidermist had made a good job of the creature — and her thought fled to the unheated bedroom, chilling the hopeful heart, draining the hot joy that filled her and that could be confided to no one. Thisbe would jeer, and, if the affair seemed promising, would make one jealous scenes as distressing in themselves as they were to what family pride one possessed. . . .

Clorinda had her moments of realization of the essential tragedy that was her elder sister, and even in high quarrel some tendril of sympathy would grope out to her, to be withered and broken at the next embittered outburst. . . .

She had met Him, to-night.

Of all men, Prince seemed to Clorinda the final expression, ensuring her divine content, seeing her with the unprejudiced eyes of the newcomer, divining as he would with that level, kindly gaze the essential soul within the ungainly outward sheath. For Prince one could be unselfish, learn to cook and housekeep were it neces-

sary, give up hunting and sport if he disapproved of it for his wife, or (oh lovely thought), whose danger and risk he feared for her sake.

Clorinda's marriage, she knew, would leave Thisbe terribly alone. One didn't love Thisbe, but belonged together, fighting the world upon the shared basis of disillusion. Thisbe, of course, was hopelessly plain, always more fatal than downright ugliness, but the situation faced, they had had some good times together . . . It was something to make people laugh. Cinderella for all her yellow hair and faultless skin couldn't do that.

A line slid into Clorinda's brain as she mounted the great curving staircase to her room.

I laugh that I may not weep.

Thisbe could raise a roar as well. Were her japes, too, a challenge to grief, poor Thisbe?

The village of Daisydown, which knows to an ounce and a pint the orders of grocery and beer that are sent up to the Hall, doesn't know quite everything, would have scouted with incredulity the notion that the unlovely woman may presumptuously harbour the emotions of the beauty, would have stood agape in that vast and desolate bedroom, discomfited and, who knows? abashed a little before the sight of the Honourable Clorinda, the Baron's freak of a daughter, upon her knees by the tester bed, her startling hair buried in the tarnished tinsel and dusty velvet of its great overspread, petitioning in her husky, masculine voice for a boon most singularly feminine.

'Oh God,' prayed Clorinda, 'he's coming here to-morrow. You know what I feel about him. Make him love me. Please . . .'

VIII

The thoughts of Thisbe in her adjoining apartment — for room seems too misleading and stingy a noun with which to describe that faded spaciousness — were of a texture at once more robust and

apprehensive. Unlike her praying sister, she was faced with a suspected and clinching calamity without extenuating ray of hope.

Her feeling for Mr. Charming was not of the urgently personal quality of Clorinda's; to Thisbe, the advent of the Americans had merely represented another chance of marriage which in one second had been snatched from her that night.

Leaning upon the dressing-table, booted leg tapping, her pale and prominent eyes fixed upon vacancy, she squared her memory for some justifiable data. And nothing presentable came; doomed, was it? to inarticulate and desperate certainty of failure, she tapped and gazed and pondered, sure only of one thing; it seemed: that out of these strangers high advantage was to accrue to the family drudge. But, wasn't that anybody's obvious deduction? The beauty of the family and the two ugly ones. It could be, but wasn't, for Thisbe. Knowing nothing, yet she in one yellow flash knew all, and could find no words for the sorry faith that was hers.

But, if knowledge was power . . . wasn't this half-awareness also a weapon? Was it impossible, *now*, to change the course of events, to avert the future . . . and by constant watchfulness and what campaigning seemed necessary, alter the lives of all three of them and cheat that which, Thisbe sensed, contrived against herself and Clorinda?

She hurried awkwardly to the door, passed out on to the landing, that dark expanse aligned with mildewed oil paintings and lit by one candle stuck in a whisky bottle, gave the barely-sketched thump of familiarity upon the adjoining door, flung it open.

She had an optical illusion of her sister, scrambling long-legged to her feet by the bedside, but dismissed the mental association with incredulity. One didn't say prayers between meals, or very often at the regulation times, in that house.

Hitching herself dumpily upon a chair-arm, for the next ten minutes Thisbe wasted no time. The couple spoke to each other singularly like sisters.

'Look here, Clo, it's about Charming.'

Clorinda's hands, fluffing up her hair, faltered at their thankless travail. She looked enquiring and anxious but said nothing. 'He's

going to propose to Cin. I think it's Prince,' Thisbe added vaguely, 'though it *might* be the brother, Earle.'

Clorinda answered harshly, 'What makes you think so?'

Thisbe blinked pale eyes. 'I don't know. But I'm sure.'

'You fool,' dispassionately came the voice from the shadows, and its gaunt and haggard owner advanced. But alarming though Clorinda could be, Thisbe stood her ground. The voice said, 'Is this one of your jokes, Thiz? Your beastly jokes?'

'No. No, I swear it isn't. Cross my heart.'

'Then — ?'

'I tell you I don't *know* why I'm certain. It never occurred to me until I heard his name, to-night. And then Mrs. Beech backed him up — '

'Backed him up? D'you mean she announced,' Clorinda's face worked for a second, 'this — this engagement?'

'No, no. It was — oh, it sounds crazy to repeat — a remark about being late for supper, but it showed me, suddenly, that she was with him against us.'

Clorinda's fingers rapped the carved column of the bedpost. 'He's coming to tea with me to-morrow. Doesn't *that* prove — ?'

'No; I should say not. I don't know why he's coming, Clo (it might be to see Cin, you know), but even if it wasn't that, seeing him alone won't help,' Thisbe's voice was almost a shout, 'I tell you, it's all arranged. And if he isn't gone on her now, he will be.' She tapped her teeth slowly. 'I was thinking — but what's the use? All the old stunts got one nowhere. . . .'

Clorinda avoided her sister's eye. They were both remembering. Violence, save under cover of practical jokes which had often sent their youngest sister up to her attic at night drenched to the skin yet still kept your action in the unassailable class of humour, they had had to rule out from her eighth year . . . it looked bad if you left marks and might be difficult to explain to the neighbours. And if the girl were driven too far, Thisbe hinted, there were Societies . . .

Together the sisters had found other means: little matters of making her eat food that made her sick, and then some suitable punishment for making a mess . . . or that time she had cut her foot

in the forest and Thisbe, all concern, had bathed the open sore with ammonia for arnica — so easy to confuse the bottles and none so apologetic as she while the girl shrieked. Things like that.

And clothes. Their own discarded undergarments cut down. It had been easy to persuade the little girl that the silken skirts which so often drew snivels from cold in the autumn and winter were matter rather for pride and gratitude where her elders wore but cloth and wool.

Pneumonia. For years the sisters had looked hopefully to this possible solution. But the young are resilient . . . it had been a long and difficult and disappointing campaign. Of the two, Thisbe had ever been the more fertile of notions for use against the youngest: less suspect that that round, jocose and rollicking figure should carry them out in the guise of joke or mischance. Both sisters recognized it.

'But her bath nights were fun, in the old days,' Thisbe mused, 'all that was your idea, Clo.'

'I know it was. And although God knows I wish she were dead, I'm not altogether proud of it.' Clorinda's voice caught; 'she's got all her life before her'.

'My aunt, Clo! you have got it badly! I've heard love makes a woman mushy but this is beyond everything! You're not going to welch on me? You can't! Together we might think out more things . . . I'm as keen on keeping her out of sight as you are and for the same reasons, damn the little brute, and I'm in the running for the Americano, too, if I can hook him —'

But Thisbe quailed a little internally at the new look of absolute contempt in her sister's face. 'You have no right to try if you don't care for him,' Clorinda grated.

'Rats, old dear, all's fair in this life, only I'm telling you: it's going to be a job.' The other muttered what seemed to be 'Oh, I know, I know'. 'Not the usual job,' pursued Thisbe, 'but a question of beating fate.' She relapsed again into vagueness. 'We'll have to be prepared against everything that happens, and the snag is that one doesn't know what to pass and what to scotch.'

It was perhaps not to be wondered at that Clorinda discounted this; she couldn't, viewing Thisbe, easily associate prophecy or the

clairvoyante gift, if such it were, with that round and moonlike face, that podgy wrist and currant eye. It helped to account for the harlequin-pattern of her own behaviour next day when entertaining the elder Mr. Charming, but that night in her bedroom her personal plight took precedence, even if it was to awaken her also to unhappy awareness. She said at random, ‘What did Mrs. Beech say to — him?’

Thisbe’s face set; her small, bright eyes fixed upon her sister she conscientiously repeated: ‘We must get on, dinner’s already late and Arthur will be in a fearful state.’ And stared with morbid fascination. For Clorinda, the comb falling from her fingers, ran her freed hand feverishly through her hair — she didn’t, the other believed, seem to know what she was doing — and stood unmoving, fixed in some time of her own though her eyes never left Thisbe’s face. And quite suddenly she began to shake all over. Her voice was the rustle of stirred, dead leaves.

‘I see what you mean, now. She *knows*.’ And ‘But, is she one of us? Has she always been?’ And then, desperately, ‘What do we mean, both of us? I can’t remember. . .’

Very slowly the door opened and a large, furred face, glassy-eyed, looked round it. The cat had padded upstairs to let them know that supper was ready and he himself ready for it.

Well, cats do.

S C E N E 5

I

PRINCE telephoned the Vicarage next evening as the Vicar was settling down to chess with the organist, and Mrs. Beech to a basketful of darning. She hurried into the hall. Ear glued, eyes fixed with misleading absorption upon a photogravure of St. Sebastian, in a glare, purely secular, of gratified curiosity, she gulped down what Mr. Charming had to relate.

He was, it appeared, shaken in his opinion as to the sanity of the Honourable Clorinda: he saw more than ever what Alison meant about them all after that tea at the Hall. Even Honourable Thisbe wasn't acting like herself — or was she? If Alison would credit it, not a joke passed, not a single crack. She acted like she'd got his number. But what number?

'Did you try talking dumb, Prince?'

'I did not. I guess I want your support for that, Alison, and even when we both talked sane the other night Honourable Thisbe didn't like it: you saw the way she was off like a streak....'

'Was Cinderella at tea?'

'She was not.'

'Ask after her?'

'I certainly did. They informed me she was gone some place to a young people's party.'

'What? And you *believed* it?'

He was apologetic. 'It was the kind've come-back that called for one of our lie-detectors, Alison. I couldn't fight it. They were my hostesses.'

'Yes, I see. Go on.'

The tea, Mrs. Beech gathered, had been thoroughly, wholesomely boring, and this aspect of it had profoundly disturbed his never-dormant professional interest, for if the abnormal suddenly turns normal on you there is as real cause for apprehension as when the normal suddenly goes nuts, explained Mr. Charming. 'It's a question of metabolism, Alison. And just as I thought I was commencing to chart Honourable Clorinda, she springs something else on me.' She was, it seemed, by turns moody and silent and urgent: over the tea-table possessive of his notice yet alarmed, grotesquely wary and seeming to look for cues to her sister. It was when he had at the Honourable Clorinda's invitation roved the great neglected gardens that she had become at once more comprehensible and disturbing . . . here the line went dead, and Alison resuscitated it with a downright 'Don't be chivalrous, Prince. This is business.' The line revived promptly.

Clorinda had tentatively put her hand on and through his arm.

She had looked at him with those eyes of hers, had stooped a little — so tall was she — as though she meant . . . ‘Mind you’, said Mr. Charming, ‘I was prepared for that, up to a point. She didn’t trot out one symptom that we don’t understand. I recall one case broke up two chairs in my consultin’ room by reason I wouldn’t seduce her — period chairs, too. Louis Kans — but what struck me in the case of Honourable Clorinda was it wasn’t only routine suppression with her, as I’d expected, when first she began to give me the high sign.’

‘What was she wearing?’ cut in Mrs. Beech with an apparent irrelevance that would have infuriated any ordinary man, but the line went dead again as he considered. ‘Well . . . she’d a kind of a mauvey gown on — ’

‘All one colour? No bits and pieces and dashes of red and yellow?’

‘No, no . . . come to think’ve it, she looked more like a lady than ever I remember to’ve seen her.’

‘My soul! Then she *has* got it badly!’ responded Alison. ‘Well, go on.’

‘Well, then, we got back to the house again and there was Honourable Thisbe looking real anxious.’

‘Jealousy.’

‘No. Anxious. And from then on every last remark I made she jammed, and she made Honourable Clorinda act the same way after a while. That got me guessing. I was never nearer being nervous in my life. Every darned thing I suggested Honourable Thisbe turned down cold, and she even stalled at the idea of comin’ to our party at The Palace. So then I called her bluff and said anyway I’d mail her an invitation, and how anyway I hoped Honourable Cinderella’d show up, and at that she said the girl was too young.’

‘Nonsense!’

‘You’ve said it. I’d judge she was hitting nineteen. An’ then — and this was what I don’t get, either: Honourable Clorinda muscled in and looked kind of doubtful at her sister, and said right out the girl might be meant to stay home so perhaps she’d better go (I’m repeating verbatim), and Honourable Thisbe turned red in the face

and kind of muttered "No, don't you remember?" (she meant "don't forget", I guess), and the other looked kind of dazed, and it was one hell of a tea-party. Oh, and I'm afraid I was very, very uncivil.'

'Hurray!'

'No, no, it was just an unlucky break, Alison. After tea we were strolling, same as I told you, Honourable Clorinda and I, and in a field I saw a thing I'd swear was a scarecrow, and I complimented her on the notion — I'm always interested in methods with crop cultivation an' improvement, and just then it got moving and it was Baron all the time. Did I want a highball? No, but honest, I feel terrible.'

" 11 "

It was Christmas Week. The purists insist that this period begins on Boxing Day, but society is not composed of purists and sticklers, but of people who, like Humpty-Dumpty, prefer that words and phrases should mean what they sound like. And all right-minded persons are agreed that Christmas Week is over on Boxing Day, when, unless you are booked for the pantomime or a party, all is cracker rumps in the dustbin, anti-climax, liver, and a revulsion from the family that causes every member of it to seek his bedroom after luncheon on any pretext however flimsy.

In the village toyshop trade was brisk as it always was at this time of year, bringing together as it did all classes of the community. So that while the Vicar's wife shepherded Doris and Derek, who were, she noted with her unreasonable distaste, immensely considerate towards each other's preferences in playthings, and quaint and rather pretty over the dolls, and manly and Jingoistic over the soldiers so that she longed to cuff them both and give them a pair of chest-expanders apiece, Squire Whittington himself was to be seen selecting an engine for some small Fitzwarren in-law accompanied by his pretty wife, Alice, while the young Twankeys bought up immense quantities of tree ornaments. Even the Honourable Cinderella was there, wistfully eyeing toy mice for Tibbles, upon

seeing which the Squire, Lady Poynter and the Princess Soshi promptly bought her the entire stock to the number of forty-eight, to the gratification of the whole assembly and even a little hand-clapping as she slipped away into the night. Even her stepsisters arrived later, marvellously dishevelled and exceedingly facetious with all, to inspect boxes of practical jokes, which so delighted them that they tried them all on every incoming customer to the great discomfort and personal damage of the latter, who left the shop without making one purchase, powdered with flour, splotched with ink, adhesive with gum and with no little loss to the tissues thanks to concealed pins in bogus matches and red pepper in sugar almonds. Having achieved this, the elderly sisters clambered into an aged pony-trap which instantly and unaccountably fell to pieces in spite, or because of, its long family service, to the imperfectly concealed mirth of all, at which the pair, picking themselves up from the snow, their faces glaring with fury, their lips about to utter words of mutual recrimination, caught sight of Alison Beech. Thisbe dug Clorinda briefly in the ribs, and spoke, ventriloquist fashion, between her teeth.

‘Don’t start anything before *her*.’

Aloud, she remarked, ‘Our motor’s smashed, the lorry’s out of juice, the snow has bunged the works and all’s no use.’

Scraps of the ensuing discussion were audible through the shop door to Alison, as she tried to prevent Doris from singing a lullaby to the baby doll she cradled in her arms.

‘I’d rather drive a donkey any day.’

‘Then drive yourself!’

‘Now, what’s *your* meaning, pray?’

The sisters departed, bickering. But all sisters do that, Mrs. Beech consoled herself, trying to shut her eyes and brain to that authentic glance of hatred and despair they had exchanged. And yet they were supposed to be allies, and if allies could look like that, what hope for the youngest of the family? . . .

Dolly dear, when holding you
I’ll be never sad or blue —

sang Doris, while Derek quite abominably accompanied her upon a toy guitar.

'Doris, be *quiet*! D'you want the whole shop staring at you? And put down the guitar, Derek, at *once*.' Flushed and exasperated, the Vicar's wife shepherded nephew and niece from the toyshop. To her irrational relief, both Derek and Doris sulked on the way home: not for long, but they had unmistakably sulked, thought their aunt with a sensation of minor triumph, for it either promised that in spite of Daisydown and its unguessed hold upon them they were still normal children after all, or would be an item to discuss with Prince. And that incident of Clorinda and Thisbe might be a distinct haul, too. In that exchanged glance, Alison realized that she had never come closer to them and all they stood for.

It was over all too soon, for Doris slipped her unwanted hand into that of Mrs. Beech and begged, 'Oh, Auntie, never be cross with us again; with *me*, if you *like*, but *not* with Derek!' while Derek, putting his unwelcome arm through his aunt's, cried ringingly, 'Punish *me* if we've done wrong, but don't punish *Doris*, oh *don't*!'

'That's enough, you little ass,' answered Mrs. Beech, trying not to shout. In their suits of scarlet velvet, nephew and niece gambolled round her the rest of the way.

S C E N E 6

I

THE invitations to the Charming's dance were delivered by Henrico, who motored madly about the village trying to locate the addresses of their recipients. All safely delivered, via many a languishing glance from the steppers of The Pig in a Poke and the inmates of The Home, whose mentally deficient girls' deportment at sight of his sloe-black eyes had to be penalized by extra shifts in the bake-house, their clouded minds labouring under the delusion that the romantic stranger was Rudolf Valentino whose demise had

coincided with the affliction leading to their incarceration, the reactions of the village were many and various.

Lady St. Cope thought that her sleeping charge could not be left, until, turning the invitation in response to a pencilled request to that effect, she read that a special ambulance complete with central heating would be in attendance to convey the ladies St. Cope from Dormer Grange to The Palace, where every attention and (the brothers trusted) diversion would await them, upon which she relented dubiously. One could leave early. The Whittingtons accepted with acclaim, also the convivial Twankeys. The M.F.H., Sir Francis Poynter, supposed to his wife that they'd have to look in for an hour and it was a pity these fellows were American, the international situation being what it was — it seemed hardly cricket to swig their fizz — eh? — when you wanted to kick 'em in the pants — . Still, one of the most hopeful coverts lay slap in their demesne and they'd stumped up handsome with Hunt subscriptions (like all climbers) even if they did sit a horse as though 'it ran on petrol. The Vicar said How Kind and he supposed we must encourage local doings, though a book and a pipe, a book and a pipe . . . Mrs. Beech wouldn't miss it for anything, and said so.

In her simple living-room, Miss Queenie Good, the invitation lodged upon the overmantel, sang as she pressed and freshened a white chiffon gown trimmed with gold braid, and applied benzine to a matching pair of satin-and-gilt sandal shoes. Her sequin hair-band with the pretty star had tarnished a little, but, thought the warbling figure, a light heart goes all the way.

For to-night, for to-night
Let us dream of a dream of delight, tra-la-la —

caroled Miss Good from *Tom Jones*.

John Durden lamented with eloquence that he had nothing to go in, and Mrs. Durden, beginning an exasperated tirade, saw the justice of his complaint before she got properly under way, and stopped, and thought, and shook her head, and went out and cried a little by the water-but^t until she observed the Charming's car rolling down the lane, upon which, believing herself seen, she

laughed very heartily and gave it a facetious semaphore message with a vest and camisole taken off the washing-line. About her own dress she wasted no emotion. Nobody cared what an old woman looked like, and it'd be odd if the bandboxes under her bed didn't yield up something. And for the rest, she was going on this outing to forget she and Jack were poor no less than to try and build up something useful in the way of friends that might help his career and lead to a good job, and if she herself couldn't look lah-di-dah in all that posh company, well, he laughs last who knows his own father, and it was a long cook that gathers no moss.

Mrs. Durden spent an engrossed morning in her attic bedroom, for the bandboxes held objects of raiment long forgotten even by herself, though the top and middle layers were more or less familiar. And in two hours, during which the pudding boiled over and the stew boiled away, the kitchen chairs were draped with a set of Prince of Wales feathers only slightly bent, a pair of kid gloves that had once been worn at a Masonic by the late Mr. Durden when waiting at table, a gauze scarf, its missing beads of jet cleverly replaced by small lumps of coal, and a wondrous garment, *circa* 1841, of yellow cabinet, wedding dress of grandmother Trot. And as if this were not enough, there were a cameo brooch the size of a Lyons meat pie at twopence-halfpenny, and a choice assortment of artificial chrysanthemums with which shoulder and waist and hem could be decorated. Gala stockings presented a problem over which she mused a space, but her carpetslippers were very comfortable and their hearts-ease pattern of no less comforting a quality to the thoughts. Under that gown nobody would see her stockings, and the white pair with black vertical, or the white with red circular, stripes would be equally warm. And they'd all belonged to dear Mother, who, God love her, wasn't here to see this proud day.

Mrs. Durden slowly lifted her bonnet, rang her handbell, and descended the stairs, crablike, for a session with the irons. The dinner was a mess but it'd bin worth it. *And* the saucepans were still hot enough to press out the clothes. . . .

As Mrs. Durden vigorously passed the hot saucepan over scarf, dress and gloves, the novel nature of the work, no less than the

festivity it adumbrated, impelled her, as it had Miss Good, to song. But the nature of their respective ditties was of a difference quite startling.

I've got a jumper that fastens down the front
And another one that fastens down the back:
One of satin, one of crêpe de chine
One a Never-Was-er and an old Has Been;
Jumpers charm, there is no doubt of that,
They knock spots off the roses round the door:
Fellows like to see us sitting
At our crochet and our knitting
And that is what we girls knit jumpers for.

The chorus completed, to the accompaniment of lusty thumps with the saucepan to mark the rhythm, Mrs. Durden suddenly realized that her dinner and Jack's was indeed a ruin, and — so ephemeral is joy — burst out crying. 'Oh bur-her-her,' blubbered the widow, and flinging her apron over her head as you cover a parrot to silence it (and who shall say that this may not be the unsuspected origin of the gesture by those in vocal grief?), she relapsed upon the milking-stool.

II

The Baron and his daughters were at luncheon when their invitations were delivered; the Page brought them in by soiled hand, but the family at the Hall had long abandoned the formality of salvers.

There were four envelopes, and the boy pocketed the one marked, incredibly, with the name of his youngest mistress: he would palm it to her later. Secretiveness was second nature: he had served the family for nine years, now . . . He was swelled with pride and joy, but as always the chafing of apprehension lamed hope. Pleasure for *her* meant beastliness from *them*, of what nature the youth couldn't guess, and trying to unwillingly, sickened. He took it out of *them*

when and as he could; getting in digs, laying traps for them, all hurtful mentally or physically, he hoped, trusting to observation of the elder sisters' vulnerability to sharpen his wits, working, had he ever given it a thought, singularly on the lines of Tibbles, the cat, augmented by the intelligence of the boy . . . it was the meaning of those rough-and-tumbles in the kitchen which to an observer must seem so amusing . . . misleadingly comic to eye and ear, when that household lashed itself perversely to a fury of facetiousness as medium for release of its own frustrations of poverty, anxiety, jealousy and desire. And on the principle that truth may be conveyed by jest, a wonderful amount of minor cruelty was satisfactorily accomplished in horseplay.

Buttons had come straight from an Orphanage to service as Page at the Hall. What his name was nobody ever knew, or will know. It seemed to the authorities an excellent opening for another unwanted child. He came fresh, if one may call it that, from a dead-level mohotony in which a properly scrubbed linoleum was more important than manners or honesty, routine obedience than literature and God, to an atmosphere at once free and subtly pernicious. At the Hall, time and necessity were the spurs; you worked for pocket-money: when that ceased on this pretext or that, you stayed, knowing no alternative, and bound by an affection doubly hopeless for the youngest daughter of the house. And, in time, the boy was to become aware, gogglingly, gigglingly and then uneasily, of another affection, too available, from one of *them* . . . so that he dodged, and invented errands when, quite impossibly, he guessed her game, the game of a woman old enough to be the mother he couldn't name: the game of the Honourable Thisbe.

He tucked the invitation yet deeper into his green house-jacket.

III

At the luncheon table the Baron, one booted leg extended for his youngest daughter to cope with, scanned the invitation, and his seamed face broke into a grin that rayed innumerable wrinkles

round eyes and mouth. He said with brisk jocularity, ‘Well, my darlings, it’ll save us a dinner. A bird in the hand is worth two at the poult erer.’

‘Oh shut up, Pa.’ Thisbe looked out of the window, calculating, and the stealthy exit of Clorinda passed unnoticed. Clorinda could move very quietly when she chose, and the great hop-pole could confound you utterly by sudden appearances about the house when by all laws of chronology she should at the moment be somewhere else.

‘Nine-thirty to four,’ mused the Baron. ‘Oh for God’s sake, girl, look what you’re doing! You nearly had m’foot off.’ The boot, muddied and damp with snow, had wrench ed her wrist, but nobody thought of that. Cinderella dropped his foot, flushed with pain, and her father swore. The Page saw. ‘I’ll do it. Why the halleluia can’t you take off your own blinking boots?’ The girl, head bowed over her hand, muttered ‘Oh Buttons, *don’t*’, but the boy was growing up. He was nineteen . . . in that house money was the consideration and they owed him much, if you took it in years, and he was beginning to use that situation. They’d never sack him. Couldn’t, either.

The Baron, smiling genially, lifted his hand to select a vulnerable spot upon the stooping servant, but Buttons sensed the action automatically and with the gutter jiu-jitsu painfully acquired in Orphanage playground jerked the Baron off his chair asprawl upon the floor. Further down the table the two broker’s men looked on and roared with happy laughter. This was a household after their own heart; every member a comic, and no mistake, except the youngest, and here they were, at it again.

I V

In her room, Clorinda lay on the great bed, nervous fingers picking at a tarnished tassel, the other hand rigid as her upward gaze.

This invitation . . . it seemed to bode some climax . . . unless one was being stampeded by Thisbe’s incoherent alarms and prognostications.

cations. Matters came to a head at dances in life as in fiction, and if the inevitable attraction of males was once more brewing between Prince and Cinderella . . . was it safest to chance it, or scotch the possibility outright? But wouldn't that lead to enquiries next day, to telephone calls or a personal visit of condolence or regret? You couldn't be everywhere at once. . . .

The prone figure realized as never before how exhausting was this business of incessant watchfulness, this campaigning against the youngest member of the family. Wouldn't it be, in a way, a relief untold to mind and muscles to relax for good, give it all up, resign oneself to the good fortune of the girl? The agony of her marriage would abate, with time, meanwhile she'd be out of the house for ever. And the marriage might turn out unhappily . . . or they might allow her to attend the ball and dress her so badly that she'd be a wallflower. But *he'd* seen her as she really was. Or one might take her, and be the loving elder sister, tender and solicitous for her success, for *him* to note and admire in one . . . But he mightn't notice, in that crowd, and anyway Thisbe mightn't agree to it.

Into the fevered thoughts of Clorinda Thisbe burst. She dumped herself upon the bed and said without preamble: 'She's nothing to go in; it's ridiculous to go three strong, and somebody must be left to look after the house.'

'Buttons?'

'Um . . . then she's nothing to go in.'

Clorinda sat up lankily. 'What about a local scandal?'

'Oh fudge. I tell you, Clo, we can't risk this party. If we let Cin go to that dance, we're done.' Her fat face reddened with the violence of its conviction. She clutched her sister's wrist. 'All that has happened before, and it turned out disastrously.'

Clorinda's drawn face relaxed, but her look of relief was swept from her as Thisbe added 'For *us*'.

v

It froze Clorinda with the dreary grip of winter. In all their life together she had never seen this aspect of her sister.

She said suddenly, 'But he only talked of asking the brat —' From somewhere in the house, dulled by distance, a sudden yell of pain reached them. It sounded once more, breaking upon a third howling cry most wolf-like. The women listened placidly, immobile, as those who follow the earliest morning note of birds.

Thisbe grinned. 'She *did* get an invitation, my dear, and I *think* Pa's found it. The boy floored him just now.' She fell silent, lusciously picturing the discovery of the envelope. It would be on him somewhere, the sneaky little brute. But the head of the house had torn the jacket off for another purpose . . . and that had been fulfilled . . . the Baron paid that type of debt with interest; that at least was promptly settled, always. It settled part of her own score, incidentally, and even Thisbe writhed as she remembered sundry occasions between herself and the youth when he had — properly, of course, but God, how it burned one! — rejected certain advances . . . evaded certain opportunities.

S C E N E 7

I

THE date of the ball drew near. The event was not to leave even the Vicarage unscathed. It started with Mrs. Beech's growing conviction that if some stepsisterly hanky-panky blocked the acceptance of Cinderella, Prince would be disproportionately disappointed, and that was at once annoying and pathetic and disturbing. And then it seemed, in the extraordinary American way that was sheer convention in the States but marked in England, the poor young man was planning to send the girl a shower of Beauty roses; the gesture, he assured Mrs. Beech, didn't mean a darned thing, and it had been quite hopeless to convey to him that in man-hungry England a bunch of dandelions would get a girl all wrought up, for he'd ordered the roses from London, and there it was. And to

cap all folly, thought Alison as she unwillingly superintended the going to bed of Derek and Doris, Prince had gone to the crack-brained if kindly length of presenting the Baron's youngest daughter with a pair of slippers — white leather, crystal-beaded moccasins, lined and edged with what looked dreadfully like real chinchilla. And as though the devil weren't busy enough already, pondered the Vicar's wife, they fitted. Prince had confessed quite awkwardly for so direct and dispassionate a mind that he felt she was cold at night, a suspicion that Mrs. Beech had once confided to him, and how maddening *that* was! And if he wasn't in love with the girl now, but merely in that dangerous and tricksey and gullible state known as *épris*, he probably would be, and between the slippers and the roses village opinion might (and would if she knew it) shove him to the altar when he had his career to think of. American men, one had always read and heard, were born sentimentalists, but Prince was for humanity's needs, not for the individual, 'and if I put in my oar', thought Alison, quite maddened at nephew and niece, who had selected that night to be especially pretty and whimsical, 'everybody'll only think it's jealousy, dammit'. And there was Derek, girlishly capering in his pink silk pyjamas, and Doris very boyish in hers, being quaint and full of diction and unreasonably ceaseless and curled, though God knew one had combed her hair.

'Oh Auntie, we're so excited about the ball! Will Mr. Prince meet the fairy Princess there and live happy *ever* after?'

'Who is she?' coldly enquired Mrs. Beech, crosser than ever at her own misgivings being put into words, and such sickening ones. 'Now if you're ready and your bottles are hot, I'll turn out the light.'

'We're never afraid of the dark, aunt Alison. At night, the Shadow fairies come and play about the floor, and the moon chases them.'

Mrs. Beech looked acid. And then from some recess in her brain shot words apparently irrelevant and superficially ridiculous. But it did the trick, for Doris reddened with real embarrassment and avoided her eye, while Derek looked amazed and then genuinely apprehensive.

'It's no use: there's no rhyme to "shadow",' Alison rapped. And all that evening as she totted up the Mothers' Union accounts she was sustained by a sensation of some minor triumph.

II

The Palace, too, knew its harassments, for the Messrs. Charming were to experience the British workman at his most typical, in which good humour, integrity, a perfect inability to carry out any order as given or reproduce any shade of enamel as originally chosen, was combined with a tendency to call for mates, step-ladders and candles when the householder had every logical reason to suppose the repairs completed, to announce final, unanswerable and insoluble disaster upon every other working day whose scope was not even hinted at in the estimate of damage, and to emit, like Ophelia, snatches of old songs of *Champagne Charlie* vintage through every open window of which the Palace possessed an abundance.

Thus, over the days preceding the ball the brothers learned (*he'r Di-sy, h'er Di-sy, give me ye rarncer, do—er*) that the death-watch beetle was at work in the panelling of the morning-room, that (*For the bells were h'er ring-ging the Old Year out and the New-Year-IN*) the grand piano had scraped the fresh paintwork something shocking, and *that*, now, was a very nasty colour to match, that riceyfied white, like, and not so much as a half-pound tin could longer be obtained, what with the war and one thing and another: and (*OW, juster song at twi—liight*) them double doors'd swelled with the damp an' disuse you'd be surprised, and should the lad (here a man of seventy-two was indicated) plane 'em off or would Mr. Charming consider takin' the doors *right* off the 'inges and throwin' in a way the 'ole room into one? Finally, the white-coated army, resourceful to the last, deposed with weary triumph that the dry-rot (*Twas the voice from the ole village choir*) had been overcome in perfection in the ballroom itself save for a large and unsuspected area in the exact centre of the floor, and it was curious

we 'adn't remarked it, said the foreman, interested, but you never knew with these old 'ouses.

That was three days before the dance.

Then, the Baron's elder daughters accepted the invitation, and the Honourable Cinderella regretted that she was unable. And, via an ascending chain of house servants, there was a rumour that certain feeling had been aroused in the village because the catering had been placed in the hands of a London firm and that universal offence had been given by the fact that Mr. Charming had invited all the population of Daisydown, aside from the infirm, the too spectacularly aged or young, housebound or intoxicated, and the mentally deficient young ladies from the Home. In mounting emotion the elder Mr. Charming rushed daily to the Vicarage to receive caution, advice, sympathy and explanation, most of which was too late anyway.

'But Alison, I thought England was real socialistic, not like us in America: we're just a Republic and stay fixed, politically. I mean, we don't team kings and Communists as you do.'

'But even in America you have a pretty strong idea of class distinction, Prince. I understand that in your villages it is possible and even laudable to go fishing with your tailor, but not with the barber.'

'That's so. But now that England's all out for equality I thought I'd be doing right by asking everyone to the party.'

'My dear, there's nothing Socialists dislike more than to be asked to meet each other. Most Socialists are at heart Socialites on the climb or they wouldn't be Socialists because they'd no longer have anywhere to climb to. By inviting all and sundry without discrimination, you've very sweetly intended to show them that they're all equal, and they resent it.'

'But Alison, they claim they're all equal!'

'What they really mean is equality of spending capacity. Have you ever heard a Socialist inveighing against the injustice of his son's inferior brains or standard of manners or honesty as compared with those of the Squire's boy? No, and you won't. What he inveighs against is that his son's coat isn't as warm, or his dinner as

plentiful. And as for the dry-rot and Clorinda and Thisbe coming and the beetle in the morning-room and Cinderella not accepting, I'm as sorry as I can be. And about the catering, I dropped exactly that brick when I first started housekeeping here and found that the grocer's idea of high wassail was a nameless limejuice and tinned salmon, and sent orders to the County town. You've gone one worse in dealing with London, that's all.'

'Well, Alison, I can't sit my guests right down to limejuice and canned salmon. Besides, you say yourself that the people want the best.'

'They do. But they won't enjoy it because they understand tinned salmon while caviare is a sealed book to 'em. But they'd rather be offered something expensive they think perfectly beastly than something cheap that they like, and if everything else fails they can complain that you gave them stinking fish, so they win either way.'

Mr. Charming gleamed at her hopelessly through his horn-rims, exclaimed 'Hell's little silver bells!' and turned to go, colliding as he did so with the Reverend Arthur Beech, who, concealing his surprise at the manner and expression of one so usually balanced, courteously remarked upon the weather, adding that, for winter, the day was turning positively balmy, an opinion in which Prince concurred with violence.

And even this was not all. For fate, unmollified by the hospitable motive and kindly heart of the elder Mr. Charming, and unconvinced still that in securing unto him dry-rot, unwanted guests, wanted ones who couldn't come and a growing list of malcontents at his expensive gesture, she had done herself full justice, produced the item that the London florist to whom he had entrusted his arrangements should send his personal attentions one week too soon, by which the Honourable Clorinda and Thisbe became possessed of sprays of lilies of the valley and carnations, which though not in the same financial street as that tribute in hand for the Honourable Cinderella which he planned to bestow himself, were sufficient to cause a stir in any normal home.

And they were destined for the Hall . . .

Thisbe threw hers out of the window. She watched it long as it lay there in disorder on the flagstones, pondering her own inexplicable action — God knew presents from men were rare enough. But, wasn't this violent rejection the breaking of some continuity? Wouldn't *the other Thisbe* have clung on to her lilies, from elation to the final, glimpsed defeat against which her namesake was fighting? Then let the flowers go. Spoil the plan. Further variations and possible salvation from her own half-sensed doom might follow . . . and Clorinda must deal drastically with her own flowers, too, for were they not both in this thing together . . .?

But Clorinda, cornered in a remote boudoir, thick with dust and cobwebs gently stirring at the flung-open door, was holding the sheaf of pink and white to her exiguous breast, her haunted eyes wrapt. It was to her sister an unnerving spectacle.

It was to be unnerving to one other. For Prince, in those last, dementing days before the dance, was at no notice dogged and hag-ritten by the Baron's younger daughter, wearing a buttonhole of carnations, faded, dying, dead.

Distracted, he groped for courtesies, the doctor in him overwhelmed by trivia and annoyance and many amazements, until Clorinda's appalling intention dawned piecemeal upon him, as Thisbe's had upon the Page. For in her manly voice she had made love to him with all the shameless desperation of one who has nothing left to lose.

Charming was no coward: his profession had enriched an already abundant insight, but for the first time, undermined by the whole affair and the cumulative nature of the things which pressed upon him, he lost his nerve.

As he fell into the drawing-room, even the Vicar saw that something was amiss which went beyond annoyance. He left him to his wife, for Arthur Beech had a humble and self-effacing heart that was wasted upon Daisydown, and achievement too often fell sadly short of intention. Perhaps, after all, those were right who declared that women, too, should be in the church . . . Alison would know

what to do for this poor fellow: she was so dauntless, and even men of God were clumsy creatures when all was said. But he did put a diffident hand upon Prince's shoulder and murmur 'There is always prayer, always prayer', before quitting the room and the figure slumped in the well-worn saddlebag.

Prince roused himself. 'Well, I wouldn't say I shan't be reduced to it, yet,' he answered despondently. But when Alison came in he almost fell upon her.

'I tell you, this place is too rich for my blood,' he began.

'What is it this time?'

'Honourable Clorinda.'

'Oh lor.'

'Those flowers . . . they were mailed a week too soon, Alison, and it seems she — misunderstood 'em.'

'I was afraid she might.'

'But — I — they — it didn't — look here, Alison, back home, we send flowers to every girl we're introduced to and dated for the same party with, even if most of 'em don't rate higher than gardenias.'

'I know. What's the upshot?'

Prince studied the carpet. 'She isn't exactly one of my cases, of course,' he informed the moss-green pile, 'so —'

'It's us against *them*, Prince, remember.'

He eyed her squarely, at that. 'I'd nearly forgotten, Alison. Well then, she offered to be — to live with me.' His shot look was heavy with assorted appeal.

'— and it wasn't a bit funny,' Mrs. Beech concluded for him.

'Funny? Hell! Hell, it was hell! I ought to be used to that; I'm a psycho-therapist. Why, I've been *assaulted* by women, Alison, kissed, mauled in every way you can think of, an' I took it. It was part of the job. Then, why am I so shocked, *shocked* and repelled . . . ?'

She shook her head. 'They're different, somehow, those two. Did Thisbe make a similar overture to you?'

'She did not. Didn't even thank me for the bouquet.'

'Odd, that . . . I wonder why?'

'It don't signify.'

Alison's voice was sharp. 'Prince! *everything* signifies in this place. You're not welshing on me!'

'Oh I know, I know, but fact is, what with one thing and another I've lost my grip for the moment.'

'I'm so sorry, my dear.'

'I feel if I don't get right away for a bit I'll go batty.'

'Then go! go! Why not? You can come back for the party.'

'Well, I guess I will. Go to London and rest up and give that florist the works and maybe take in a few shows.'

S C E N E 8

I

BUT if the impending ball brought foreboding to Thisbe, ecstasy to Clorinda and a thrashing — the Baron had selected a steel-and-wooden shoe-stretcher — which would have laid up the Page for days had coddling been practicable in that house, to the youngest daughter it meant nothing but grief. She had hardly expected to be allowed to go to The Palace, even to be invited, but the fact that her card had come made refusal extra hard. Thisbe had, with unusual kindness, helped her compose the answer. . . .

*They had had flowers, such as bloomed no longer in the grounds of the Hall. Cinderella had found them, wilting in the courtyard, and they were reviving in her bedroom jug, transforming the whole attic with sweetness . . . Clorinda had kept hers, and she'd tried to claim the white crystal-beaded slippers as well because both their names began with C, but the enclosed card (*With the kindest regards of Prince Charming to Hon. Cinderella*) put the matter beyond all doubt; and Clo had had to give way but not before she'd tried one slipper on and split it because it was far too small for her, and she'd thrown them at one in a rage. Now it was mended again, and on*

the night of the ball Cinderella planned to wear them for a treat as she sat up with Buttons, heating soup for the party.

II

She was thinking of it, with all the resources of her inexperience picturing the splendid old rooms of The Palace perfectly restored to their former glory by Mr. Charming, creating, with her mental gilt and pink brocade, marble pillars and palms, a scene which would have enchanted the early fathers of the silent films, as she gathered firewood on the afternoon of that day designated by the Vicar as balmy. The thin winter sunlight fell gratefully upon her back through the treetops of the forest.

And the food. Lovely dishes you hadn't had to ache your shoulder-blades and ankles and burn your hands and grease-spatter face preparing. At the Hall there was electricity but no gas, and that meant that in the stifling days of high summer the kitchen range must be kept going, so that she often felt faint and had to stop and sit down if her stepsisters weren't there to goad her on. Buttons was wonderfully handy and always willing, but men can't cook, thought Cinderella, who knew nothing of Chefs, and anyway he had his own work to do, and that was too much. And what with the ball and Buttons' poor back and the hopelessness of life, she sat down on a felled tree-trunk and cried, and wiped her eyes on a remarkably dirty handkerchief, for the laundry was late and her other three were at the wash having older tears boiled out of them. And she read a tattered number of *The Screen Review* and believed every word of it, and thought the film stars quite beautiful and the males very gods and almost as kind-looking as Mr. Prince, and cried a little more because Hollywood was so unlike Daisydown and the Talmadge sisters so unlike Clorinda and Thisbe, and the palms and patios so different from the Hall and all that was in it. And presently she was joined by Miss Queenie Good, singing some gay snatch, just as a thrush burst into melody overhead. Miss Good had no luck at all in her vocal efforts. For it was quite

remarkable how competitive noise pursued her, and whether she was singing at village concerts, obliging at tea-parties, warbling at home or carolling in the forest, somebody was bound to drop a hammer, ring the front door bell, shout, or begin trilling the moment she had got started.

Suppressing a desire to box the bird's beak, she decided to stop-singing, and became her sunny self. And sitting there together, she and Cinderella conversed singularly like two girl friends.

'Whatever are you crying for?' demanded Miss Good, and then the tale was told to the well-she-nevers and just fancycs of the elder. 'But then, you see, anyway, I'd nothing to wear,' Cinderella concluded.

'Go on? I've a sweet bouclay — a beige costume it is by rights . . . but it's an evening do,' considered Miss Good, 'and a V neck isn't Dress. And beige isn't your colour only I can carry off any shade but Bottle and Prune. What you want to wear, dear, is blue. I love blue, and being so blonde you can carry off a Sky or even a Lido. I'm thinking of a reel Lido for my Spring costume, being blonde, too.'

The girl listened respectfully to these splendours. And then Miss Good, living up to her name, hesitated and achieved a supreme effort. 'I tell you what: you shall go in my frock! It's white chiffong with just a gold bando in the hair and a sequin star. Ladylike and dressy but not flashy, you know. And gilt sandals. You'll look sweetly pretty.'

'Queenie!'

Her sacrifice made and apparently accepted, Miss Good thought fit to begin pointing out the disadvantages of the proposed loan.

'Of course, I'm a fuller figure than you, dear,' she explained. 'Thirty-eight bust, but being a singer, of course . . . and the shoes mayn't be your size. I take a broad-fitting four — well, by rights it's a five in the French makes — '

' — and I couldn't possibly take it from you,' capped Cinderella, 'and anyway I've refused the invitation. Thisbe said I'd better.'

'That cat!' exclaimed Miss Good, becoming human, 'well, you know what I mean, dear, and she reely is the limit, I must say. I

tell you, you *shall* go to the ball, in my dress, and you'll be ever such a success and dance it to rags by midnight, or my name's not Queenie. I —'

But that sentence was never to be delivered, for there came the sharp sound of a shot, a pause, and the feathering appearance of a questing setter, nose to ground, followed by the younger Mr. Charming carrying a gun.

'Oh, pardon me,' remarked Earle, raising his cap, and 'Oh, darn it all,' as he sighted Devlin approaching, his luncheon tied up in a bandanna handkerchief, from one direction, and Mrs. Beech, looking tired, from another. The forest, as gossip writers would express it, was filling up.

The blush with which Miss Good welcomed the younger Mr. Charming was replaced by a look of acute annoyance at the apparition of Devlin which deepened when he seemed disposed to stop and talk. Hastily she remembered that she was a perfect lady.

'Good day, Devlin. Beautiful weather for the time of year.'

'Ah . . . but there's a storm coming or my eye ain't working,' answered Devlin, taking the luscious pleasure in catastrophe, actual or premonitory, which is so salient a characteristic of his class.

Mrs. Beech, at that simmering moment, sighted Earle: simultaneously Cinderella who (she would swear) had been perfectly cheerful on her own approach, began to cry again, while the younger Mr. Charming suddenly seemed at a loss, the hackles of the nosing dog rose as he backed uneasily, and the conventional politeness of Miss Queenie Good underwent a sea-change, which, to the Vicar's wife, was tantalizingly and depressingly familiar. For rising to her feet she addressed Devlin, who responded in kind. Exclaimed Miss Good: 'Against the scheming wiles of Devlin I am here to guard this maid (she turned to Cinderella and laid a hand upon her downcast head), bidding her hope. The day is very near when all things harmful shall be swept away, and with them *you* —'

'Well, be that as it may. I have another plan. This drudge whom you befriend to drudgery and work once more shall bend. Waning already is her lucky star. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, ha ha!'

Alison, disproportionately shaken as she always was by these periodic tilts between the genteel Miss Good and Devlin, helplessly caught Earle's eye and wanly remembered a phrase of his brother's.

Miss Good and Devlin were 'talking dumb'.

And as though everything weren't being enough, Devlin's perverse prophecy about the weather was fulfilled, and a crash of thunder, followed by lightning which glared through the forest, concluded the scene with almost dramatic effect.

III

The solicitous Mr. Charming junior spent the next half-hour depositing the ladies at their homes before driving back to The Palace, a hot bath and a double whisky. Alison, the last to be set down, welcomed the chance of a talk with Earle; he was the younger generation, and his impressions of Daisydown and its inhabitants might, like a child's drawing, fluke into brilliance. Also, unlike Prince, Earle's mind was, so to speak, of amateur status, as was her own, uninfluenced by the chart and consulting-room.

But she was to find that Earle's very youth was against her, he was frankly, and untroubled by mental megrims, enjoying the villagers, and only once did the conversation take a turn remotely serious, when she tried him with Cinderella, and he hesitated and said that Prince seemed real taken with her, and looked depressed, while Alison agreed and looked more depressed still. For the rest, Daisydown was quite obviously his washpot, and she learned that Earle had delighted Mrs. Durden by teaching her college yells, went frequently to the Twankeys to sing Blues with Princess Soshi who couldn't speak for weeping or weep for singing those syncopated laments, saying they reminded her of home, and of one evening, most calm and beautiful, in the ricefields of her father's estate, when certain of the coolies, practising team-work towards a fellow labourer convicted of falsifying weights, and so blackening the faces of all, set upon him and strangled him slowly — fifteen

minutes, she had timed it, before he expired, a notable achievement and a star in animosity's crown.

Miss St. Cope? A humdinger if she'd wake up, or Earle missed his guess.

Jack Durden? Well, Earle wouldn't say there wasn't something cissyfied about Jack and he was sure fond of the sound of his own voice, but since Earle had started up some songs on his own that the village positively ate, well, he and Jack hadn't seen so much of each other at that. Oh, just Hot numbers and Blues, and did Mrs. Beech know *Those Loving Hangover Blues*? Mrs. Beech shuddered and disclaimed and changed the subject, but Earle, methodically shutting off the engine, raised his pleasing light baritone in a strain whose melody, if not whose state of mind, was most reminiscent of a newly-bereaved cow.

Red-hot Mamma is turning blue,

Oh, definitely,

Absolutely.

Definitely, absolutely blue.

Only sixty, yet she talks of settling down

Won't eat her slimming diet and tired of town;

All-in wrestling don't hold her attention

Don't take an interest in her perm,

Pink gins don't rouse her as they used to do

I guess she's got a hangover for you

Red-hot Mamma is turning blue.

Since that day when you and she were parted

It takes six gigolos to get her started

Oh, definitely,

Absolutely.

With country clubs and road houses she seems to be through

Her finger nails take her only half an hour to do

Since she lost you.

Just cries until her eye-black runs in coal-black streaks

Hasn't had her face lifted for quite sixteen weeks,

If you offer her cocaine it's ten to one she'll refuse
For she's got those loving hangover blues,

Oh, definitely,
Absolutely.

She's got those loving'hangover blues.

Earle, concluding the last lamentable note, broke his reverent silence to inform Alison that she must on no account lay up his unworthy effort against the master, Nit Lausenkrank himself. He urged her fervently to believe that his vocal attempt gave positively no idea at all of the strange, compelling beauty of the ditty as rendered by Nit and his Hot Hamburgers: that those Oh-definitely-absolutelys, as scored for saxophone, oboes and ocarina, were what Earle called *music* and had to be heard to be believed, and — what did Mrs. Beech know about this: — Nit himself started life as a negro bell-hop and was now earning a five-figure income that'd make the Vanampsterdams look like thirty cents, and Earle actually knew a fellow in college whose brother had a sister who'd actually danced with Nit to *The Hangover Blues* at that, yet they said Nit was real modest and unassuming with it all and still kept up with his friends and even sent money to his old father and mother in Calabash City, and Earle guessed that this sort of thing did more for the coloured folk than anything since Abrum Lincoln. And then Earle remarked that Nit besides being a regular fellow wasn't one of Mrs. Beech's one-song composers, and earnestly favoured her with *I've A Halo Round My Head Whenever I see You, Run Me Into A Corner And I'll Do The Rest, God Had The Right Idea When He Made You*, and *At My Funeral I'll Sense Which Flowers Are Yours*. Whereat, the disintegrating Alison, almost beating upon the panes of the car for release, incalculously turned the horrid theme to negro Spirituals, whereupon Earle, with lessened enthusiasm but at equal length, favoured her with *Peter, Have You Hidden Nem Keys?*, *Herod, Don't You Touch Dat Chile, Oh Lawsy, My Saviour, I'm A Sinner, Roll Along, Jordan Water, Roll Along, Fill Up The Ark With The Saved, Ole Noah, and Fall Down, Jezebel*.

And, safe within the Vicarage, Alison had a little whisky too,

and wondered if any future remark of her own could be so constructed as to eliminate for ever the words Definitely and Absolutely.

Interval

Three days after Christmas and on the night before the Charming's ball, she was dismantling the Christmas tree and taking a private pleasure in the sugar birdcages with their walls of waxed net, and childishly grudging the drums she had filled with tiny sweets and felt obliged to bestow upon nephew and niece. Her hope that grace would be given her not to kick the tree into the fireplace should Derek and Doris become too quaint and pretty in their sayings and doings when let loose upon it was, after all, untested. For not even once had she wanted to push them out of the room at The Festival Of The Children. It wasn't that they had behaved well, they usually did, but that they comported themselves more like children than was customary. They seemed distinctly shy of herself since that night when she acidly informed them that there was no rhyme to 'shadow' . . .

The drawing-room looked nice with holly upon every picture frame, and aligning the mantelpiece; snow punctually banked the window-sills, and across the hall the Vicar happily lost himself in The Odes of Horace, which was the baffling sort of thing men did enjoy. Over the Vicarage field, the bells, freakishly loud at one second, remote and faint at the next as the wind pranked with nature, clanged out their practice peal for New Year's Eve of what Mrs. Beech, undutifully facetious and quite incapable of the niceties of campanology in spite of Dorothy Sayers and her Nine Tailors, always compendiously referred to as The Two Bobs.

Into this suitable scene commotion entered even as she wiped her tinsel-blackened hands upon her overall and decided once more that she was sick of the sight of that gnome made of wadding which they had used as decoration for quite three years, and wondered again what shop in the world kept wire clips for replacing on invalid glass balls that you couldn't suspend and didn't like (threepence each) to throw away.

With a screaming of tortured gravel a car stopped at the front door, and a hand rapped the window, which was far more alarming than it sounds, even counting the Vicar and Horace across the passage.

'Who's there? I can't open the window because of the black-out,' cried Mrs. Beech.

Prince's voice answered her, and her ear having registered that fact, she admitted him herself. He looked ill, she noted, and his manner was quite humanly confused.

'Thanks be you're alone!'

She shut the drawing-room door. 'Who is it this time?'

'Everybody — I don't know. Alison, I took your advice and went up to town, stayed at the Berkeley, it seemed a nice quiet little place, and took in a few shows. I went to the pantomime; it was called *The Babes in the Wood*.'

'A dull one,' interpolated his hostess, 'there's only knockabout comedy for the Robbers, no Dame, and the Babes are frightful little beasts, usually.'

'Well, I was interested, we've nothing of the kind in America, and these kids, they reminded me of Doris and Derek and were dressed rather similar; fancy, you know.'

'I do indeed. I think my sister must have been at a pantomime very shortly before they were born on both occasions!'

'Well, once I'd got the idea, I thought I'd take in another.' He stopped dead and looked more unwell than ever. A qualm assailed Alison even before he spoke. 'It was called *Cinderella*.'

'The best of them all,' she informed him, in what she hoped was a cheery tone of voice.

'Is it? Alison, it worried me. I felt as if I knew what was coming next, and yet when it did come it panned out different.' She waited, taut. 'And aside from this Cinderella being called by same name as Baron's girl, he had two others, and they—'

'—were called Clorinda and Thisbe,' she capped with desperation.

'No. They — I have the programme — were called "Sophonisba" and "Ermyntrude".'

'Clean British fun, my dear.'

'Um . . . but it wasn't fun to me, Alison. They had a big house an' a big kitchen and a Page, and he was called "Buttons" — '

'— Or put it that our Buttons at the Hall was named after the pantomime, my dear.'

He looked slightly relieved. 'Well . . . then it appears those sisters were cruel to the girl, only it was to set the audience laughing and you knew she'd come out on top, at least the audience knew. I wasn't so sure.' He had begun quite unconsciously pacing the room. 'You didn't see it happen, any more than we do up at the Hall.' He wheeled upon her suddenly. 'And I wasn't sure because I've lived right here in this village and I seem to be meeting that family I saw on the stage up at the Hall: why, even the father was a Baron, too, though he was a comic, you guessed he had no harm in him . . . but there was a hero, girl dressed as a boy,' his voice cracked, 'his name was Prince Charming.'

'He was a *real* prince,' she defended.

'That doesn't help.' Prince was still, now, and his face was set. 'Alison: I take it this pantomime's a kind of wild-eye'd version of some real story. Folk-lore, maybe. What happened to the real Cinderella?'

'She — she married the prince,' faltered Mrs. Beech, and was enraged no less at the way her hands were trembling than at an expression of guilt quite undeserved which she felt had crept over her face. He slumped into a chair.

'I knew it! Wouldn't that burn you up! And you never warned me! When I thought you were my very good friend.' She was stung. 'My dear Prince, men don't usually thank one for warning them off girls with whom they're obviously in love.'

'In *love*! *Me?* With Honourable Cinderella? That moron? suffering cats! I tell you, she's dead from the waist up. Oh, I'll hand it to you she's as pretty as they come, but *marry* her? *Me?* If it's those roses that are biting you, forget it. My soul! Mayn't a fellow give a pretty girl the high sign in England and a few flowers without he's compelled to be teamed up with her for life? And have Honourable Clorinda for a sister-in-law and probably a packet

of debts to settle and a mortgage on the house and maybe lose my nationality on account of having to live here? . . . does that girl expect me to marry her?'

'I don't know, she's very humble, poor kid: too used to knocks from life to protest.'

'Argh! . . . Oh, I'm sorry, Alison. Forget it. But this business has given me a bad jolt.' Another aspect of the situation struck and felled him. 'And this Prince Charming gave a ball, too! and — it mayn't mean a thing, but I've a hunch it all hangs together — there was some business about slippers, glass ones. Glass! Well, that may let me out — what's the matter, Alison?'

'Oh, nothing.'

'You've got t'tell me, you've got to, I tell you. You know something —'

'Well, only this: that that part in the Cinderella story about glass slippers was mistranslated into French, to *verre*, glass —'

'Well?'

'It was a Scandinavian word, really: *vair*.'

'Meaning?'

'Leather, I'm afraid, my dear.'

His face whitened as the silence grew. He found voice at last.

'And mine I gave her were leather . . . but I didn't try 'em on her as the story says, Alison! I *didn't!* . . . but this comedian, the Baron (Baron de Beef they called him in the programme), he had broker's men in the house, too —'

'Just coincidence,' she pleaded.

'And maybe it's just coincidence they had a large cat, up to tricks, like Tibbles . . . acting like he was a person . . . *acting like he was a man, as you once said, Alison.*' He shook his head. 'I don't like it.' His voice rose again. 'I wouldn't throw that ball now for ten million. Not now I know what's coming to me.'

'Prince! My dear!'

'Maybe if I cancel the party this — whatever it is — will pass me over. I don't know what I'm up against, but I'll throw a jack in its works if it's to be done.'

'But —' Dizzily Alison's mind tried to grasp the issues involved

by the cancellation; they ranged from offence to ice-cream freezers.' He was talking on. 'Not, God knows, if I did have the party, I'd act like that fellow in the show. If that's behaving like even fairy-tale Royalty give me a hobo every time. Why, he wasn't even civil to his guests, Alison! He just let 'em mill around without introducing any of the bunch and when this Cinderella appeared the dumb cluck didn't recognize her though they'd been meetin' in the woods for days, and he just ditched his partner without batting an eye. And the guests were hoodlums, too; just stuck around and passed rude remarks about the Baron's daughters as though it were a crime t'be homely in the face.'

'It is, Prince, in song and story *and* real life. You're the only man except my husband who doesn't laugh at Clorinda and Thisbe. Can you wonder Clorinda loves you?'

'Oh my soul! . . . well, there it is. I'm through. I'm going t'fall sick to-morrow night an' go to bed and stop there.'

'But Cinderella isn't coming to the ball, Prince!'

He fixed her with an accusatory eye. 'No more she wasn't in the play, Alison, and then this dame of a godmother got right down the chimney, though there were two doors for her t'choose from, and fitted her out in a gown that'd knock your eye out, *and* the glass shoes. How'm I to know it won't happen again, barring the chimney an' the slippers and that dumb stuff about the pumpkin coach? I'm takin' no risks.'

'But she ran home in rags, Prince! You needn't follow her, you know.'

'True. But I bet somebody'll get round that! No thanks! If I give this ball I feel I'm done. Pumpkins! Well, *we've* got an expression, meaning it's all damfoolery, and that's "punkins". Why, hell, Alison, I was planning to send the car for her!' She thought, if you could call it that, and decided. 'Perhaps you're right. Go sick. I'll back you up. Start here, if you like: a bad chill caught motoring down, and influenza to follow, pneumonia, perhaps.'

'Gosh, you're a friend!'

'Always, and — I never wanted you to marry locally, Prince,

quite apart from this — possible — thing that seems to have got hold of us both. You've your career. I'll hate to lose you, but you'd have had to go home sooner or later. Meanwhile, have a good long expensive illness, and not too infectious so that I can't come and see you — with invalid roses.'

He could smile at that. 'Alison, if you weren't married already and I'm afraid quite happily, I'd propose to you. Morally I have.'

'Thank you, dear. And now, how does pneumonia start?'

'You leave that t'me: it can set in real slowly. Better help me to the door and call Reverend Beech. Don't get scared if I find difficulty in speaking, that'll be the pleural nerve startin' up. Tomorrow, I'll have Earle phone through on the local line for oxygen cylinders: it'll be all over Daisydown by noon.'

It was. Emotions boiled anew, in which indignation, disappointment, rumours of death, hopes of a funeral, laments over Mr. Charming's lost orders to the shops when The Palace should be up for sale, once more, together with the pleasurable anticipation of an auction and bargains and a little genuine concern were mingled.

In her simple bedroom, Queenie Good, chiding herself for repining, put away the white chiffon and the gold bandeau, with star, as she sang *Sweet and Low* until the tyre of a motor-cycle in the road outside burst and silenced her.

In her cottage, Mrs. Durden took quite half the morning constructing on general principles an enormous mustard plaster for the invalid, to which, such was her affectionate consternation, and with thoughts of welch rarebit hot within her, she added a portion of grated cheese — her and Jack's entire ration for the week, so God would doubtless forgive the state of her living-room when the poultice was completed. A nice lemon squash now, would be the thing for the poor young man, but that Senior Mausoleum had forbidden any lemons to be sent out of Italy, and so the answer was one, and no wonder he called himself the Deuce. And if he and the Fury of Germany had to do without this and that, to say nothing of as many points for a tin of salmon as would set up a

porcupine, the war'd be over to-morrow, or Mrs. Durden was no prophet.

Jack was buoyant and optimistic when he met Mrs. Beech.

'Well, Mrs. Beech, never lose heart! This is a dark time for each and all of us, but the sun is shining behind every cloud —' He got no further, for a sensation of she knew not what came over Alison at that maddened moment, and she cut in crisply.

'— for those who laugh in the face of old man Care,' she proclaimed with mechanical glibness, 'so, with a smile and a song, we'll roll out the barrel, keep the home fires burning, whistle while we work and kiss the boys good-bye.'

Again she realized she had fluked into triumph, for Jack stopped slapping his thigh, looked thunderstruck, essayed some sheepish rejoinder and, turning, hurried off in the direction of his home 'just like any loutish village hobbledehoy', reflected the Vicar's wife, with some untraceable surprise.

The Poynters agreed with relief that owing to Charming's illness they needn't turn out on a beastly night, but could spend a comfortable evening at home listening-in to the Government's latest piece of pampering of the lower-class juvenile population, by which vote-catching method of fattening and safeguarding its future cannon-fodder, most of the milk, some of the oils and all of the oranges were diverted from the manual and brain workers, the invalids and aged, whose lives were of proven as against merely problematic value, and a few millions of homes all over the British Isles were being rendered a hell to which, in several cases, suicide had been thought to be preferable, for the duration of the war.

At Dormer Grange, Lady St. Cope, too, heaved a small sigh of relief at the removal of possible harm to her beautiful charge. For herself she would have welcomed the ball. Village amenities pressed hard upon one who had followed distinguished diplomacy over the world, and she was broken to American crudity; individually, she would carefully assure friends, the Americans could be delightful.

The tap-dancing barmaids of The Pig in a Poke were frankly and vocally desolate, though, as they constantly reminded each

other, a set and facial would last, and might come in, you never knew.

As during the A.R.P. exercises, the roads to Daisydown on the morning of the ball were blocked with baffled vans, bearing french polishers, ices, lobsters, rout seats, wines, flowers, spirits, palms, together with baize, oysters, confectionery and drugget, and after being paid off in the avenue of The Palace, turned abundant tail and blocked the roads for the better part of the afternoon. A quantity of the perishables were stored in the frigidaires and the overflow recklessly bestowed upon the village, by which gesture the ancient and deplorable Mrs. Woolf fell heiress and finally victim to a surfeit of crab patties and chicken mayonnaise that caused her at last to succumb, to the indescribable relief of all her relatives on both sides, including all the Woolfs and headed by the little Riding-hood grandchild. For the patties no less than the mayonnaise conflicted with the old woman's disease and caused her eyes to glare more unnervingly than ever they had before, so that her granddaughter gave one look and fled, yelling, back to her home.

The young Twankeys could only express their disappointment at the cancelled ball by giving an entertainment themselves and distributing New Year's gifts of so opulent a nature that three detectives had to be posted about the premises before and during the party, and the chef gave notice when threatened with decapitation by Princess Soshi because an *omelet en surprise* was insufficiently hot in one place and cold in another; but it was still hoped that the lovely foreigner would learn our English ways in time and a ten-pound note settled the chef, who certainly grilled to perfection. For it had taken many months to readjust her notions about her domestic staff, and it is still retailed over dinner-tables how, on entering her new home as a bride, she exclaimed, 'But—where is the torture chamber?'

But up at the Hall was dangerous tension, for the haunted withdrawals of Clorinda, gaunter than ever at this set-back to her romance, clashed rather horribly with the uproarious spirits of Thisbe, who read into the same circumstance an interpretation as

favourable to themselves as it was inimical to the youngest sister, and whose horseplay and buffoonery at this connivance of fate with her own dim instincts against the holding of the ball became more pronounced than before.

On the night before the Charming's party and while Prince unloaded his anxieties at the Vicarage, the Baron's elder daughters were having a dress rehearsal of their gowns in the great kitchen. They, too, heard the clanging bells which to Thisbe were merely a noise, to Clorinda a wedding peal that, eternally sounding for others, was at last at work for her. True, the danger of Cinderella's presence at the dance had been removed and no questions asked, but Thisbe, unsatisfied still as to the possible ingenuities of fate, determined to police the scene, for all that. Nor, as an outing, did she mean to miss anything on her own account; all Daisydown's available manpower was to be at The Palace, plus a possible house-party, and you never knew.

So the spirits of the sisters as they prinked and turned before improvised looking-glasses of stupendous dish-covers, and bickered sarcastically for the only authentic mirror in the room, in which only one's face could be seen, were high as in the old, untroubled days. Clorinda in the excitement had forgotten her comb, and as Thisbe refused to lend hers, she only half facetiously combed her hair with the toasting-fork.

Their audience, with the exception of the Baron, whose resigned and humorous comments may conceivably have cloaked a never-dead dismay at the women he was compelled to escort, was a naïve and uncritical one. The broker's men by virtue of their calling knew the family was hard up, and probably people did dress like that in the country: the unsophisticated eyes of Cinderella, as she ran with safety-pins and needle, may have perceived that her stepsisters were looking remarkable, or again, having no standards to compare them by, she may have believed that what they wore was fashionable evening dress. She certainly made no comment — that was not to be expected, but not even the ghost of a smile was visible upon her face. Nobody was ever to know her mind: Those who speak and write of her still, in and outside the village,

assume it for her; but those who have seen Clorinda and Thisbe clad for the gala occasion will depose that what they wore came originally from some hole-in-the-corner secondhand theatrical wardrobe shop, and that the pannier'd pink and green of the rotund Thisbe made her look twice her actual girth, while the brilliant cretonne of Clorinda, trimmed with paillettes of fur, made her resemble a figure twenty-five years older in some Rossetti picture, and contrive to look more like a *passé* matinée idol than ever. Their underwear was, at best, prosaic: in that household there was no margin of money for garments the public did not see, and red flannel bloomers and petticoats in plenty had been utilized in winter from old attic trunks.

The Page, straddling a chair, reckless with helpless fury at Cinderella's disappointment, remarked, 'My eye! If *you* get partners anything can happen! Who's the target, Miss Thisbe?'

'Oh, shut up, you little swine!'

'The only thing you can mash is potatoes,' retorted the youth.

The parade was over. 'Better take 'em off and hang 'em up,' advised Thisbe; 'clear the table and dish up, Cin, and look sharp. You've the scullery to do afterwards and I've split my habit, it'll have to be patched, and my topper wants another go of glycerine. There's one thing, Clo, if one of us can land Prince there'll be an end to all this contriving and making-over.'

'I'm going to bed,' Clorinda said, deeply. She didn't add that she wished to be at her best on the following night, but it is possible that her hearers knew it.

'Sooner you than with me,' one of the broker's men hoarsely whispered to his colleague, as she drifted out. Cinderella stirred and dished up at the range, Buttons cleared the table; the Baron took a quart of beer from the inside of the long-defunct wireless set, for he had discovered that you can't go on tick with the B:B.C., as the broker's men burst into a chorus in which he and the Page joined lustily.

Let's all tune in to the wartime Booze Club,
The totters' snooze club, the weather-and-news club!

They're cutting down our whisky, on our wine they've put a ban,
It costs you half a dollar to get tuppence on the can;
Some are drinking methylated spirits,
It's nicer if it's labelled 'Vintage Port';
If you don't fancy water while you carve the weekly chop,
And know the manager's mother's sister's husband in the shop,
He'll hand you out some lemonade at eighteenpence a drop,
So come and join the wartime Booze Club!

Even with all the jobs ahead of her, it was heavenly in the kitchen once. They had all left it after supper, the broker's men to their quarters over the stables, the Baron to drink brandy and water in his den, the butler's pantry, the sisters to bed and novels, leaving the place to Cinderella and the Page, leaving her free to ransack the larder of titbits for the cat's supper. All that noise and singing and laughter made her stupid, she supposed. It went on and on . . . and when you lived in the kitchen, and an attic that was sultry in summer and icy in winter . . .

She called the great cat, but he was restless, this evening, as capricious as the sisters themselves, at one moment playing with an airball she had exchanged for some empty bottles at the door, rolling to it, over it, bursting it, and then performing an elaborate, hasty toilet of disclaimer, as cats do, and at the next, loping round the room, expectant, yet rejecting the set saucers with absent-minded, hasty leaning of gratitude against his mistress's ankle.

And ever he watched the door.

Buttons was gambling against himself with an incomplete pack of dogsear'd cards, eked out with a post card for the seven of diamonds.

'Wish I could tell fortunes.' He threw the cards aside. 'The Matron at the Orphanage said she could, I seen 'er, once; used to fake good luck for 'er pets and scare the little chaps with what was comin' to 'em. I dunno . . . used to give 'em the nightmare and one of 'em went queer in the head.'

'How wicked. Why didn't they get rid of her?'
'Because she kep' what they called good discipline.'

'And then you came here, poor Buttons! Why *don't* you go? Indeed I can manage —'

He looked at her. 'I stay 'cos I enjoy havin' my fun with *Them*.' 'But they're so awful to you!'

'It's worth it. Now, if we could *both* clear out . . . but that's it, we can't. Know what I'd like? I'd like to take a little shop. I fancy the greengrocery, it keeps you in the air takin' round the orders, and I like to look at vegs. They're cheerful. And I often think of you in a nice back room with a curtain, doing light jobs, and us goin' out together, evenings. But it wooden do. You ain't my class in spite of your Pa and *Them*, and nothing'll ever get a polish on me. Take the way I speak: I know how it's done, mind you, but I can't do it.'

'I could teach you, Buttons.'

'Nah! You cooden. I don't care. But it's prevented a chap gettin' ahead. Then, I don't know 'oo me father was. Now the Baron's a fair old cough-drop but you *can* lay your finger on 'im, as the sayin' is; gentleman run t'seed. That's 'im. But me! Well, there you are.'

There, indeed, they were, and the conversation languished unhappily. But Tibbles provided diversion, trotted to the outer door and looked up, expectant, a full half-minute before the bell was pulled.

'Ever so sorry to pop in so late,' panted Miss Good, 'but I've been at choir practice, special hymns for New Year. We're doing *The Day Thou Gavest*, sweetly pretty tune but ever so sad. It ought to be *The Year Thou Gavest*, by rights, but I suppose Mr. Beech knows best. I mustn't stop. I saw a light in your sisters' rooms so took a chance. There's the — you know!' Miss Good laid a long box upon the table.

'Oh, Queenie! Oh, Buttons! It's — shall we tell him?'

'Well, I must pop off to my little bed: With these wintry mists you never know and I must take care of the throat.' As neither of her audience, engrossed with the box and its contents, took the hint and asked her for even one verse of *The Day Thou Gavest* or of anything else, she popped.

It was while Cinderella lifted the dress and crown (with star) out of their tissue paper that Tibbles began to scratch earnestly at the table-leg and to make large and voiceless mews that split his striped face wellnigh in halves, like an ink-pot, and a second or two before the urgent rapping fell like hail upon the outer door. The Page, impatient, flung it wide.

Earle Charming was disclosed, snow-powdered.

'Honourable Cinderella? Oh, glad see you. I'm very, very sorry, but the party's off.'

His little hostess, dusting a chair for the guest (like a servant, he noted indignantly), was wide-eye'd. 'Off where, Mr. Earle?'

'What? Why, I mean it's cancelled. Fact is, my brother's been taken real ill. This influenza.'

(*Watch the reaction*, Prince had instructed him, as he retired to his suite in The Palace.)

But Earle had little to report on his return, for the vicarious disappointment of an unselfish girl could be twisted to mean anything you fancied. 'What did the cat do?' rapped Prince.

Tibbles had done nothing at all: he sank down like a trussed goose, paws folded, and looked benign. After all, he is a cat, Prince reflected, and if he is a cat, he mayn't belong in this business at all. On the other hand, the beast had certainly given himself away, joined the party, as it were, several times in the past. . . . This cat in the pantomime: Billy, his name was, he'd done nothing either, aside from fooling with an airball. But then in the show the party hadn't been postponed. . . . So Tibbles was marking time: Deprived of his cue he was acting like a cat?

'And the boy, whatsisname, what line did *he* take?'

'Buttons? With a chump like that it's hard to say. He gowped a bit just as any boy would in a hick village at a bit've news.'

'And — Honourable Cinderella?' The brothers were careful to avoid each other's eyes. 'Very sorry, very, very sorry, Prince.'

'But, say, was she kind of struck dumb? Like she didn't know how to act? Like she hadn't any come-back and was at a loss and waiting for a pointer?'

'Why, no, that never struck me.'

Prince sighed and ch'kd. Of course in fairness to Earle he must remember that he and Alison had never let the youngster in on the Daisydown business. But had Prince, pacing his bedroom in The Palace in his invalid's dressing-gown, been at the Hall three minutes after the departure of his brother, it is possible that he might have acquired all the material he needed. Or, again, he might not. For if the cat, Page and Cinderella stood deprived of cues through his action, what of Clorinda and Thisbe?

The latter, roused from sleep at the knocking and ringing, heard the news of the cancelled party first. In a quite extraordinarily unwinsome pair of pyjamas, she stood, gaping, her brain doing its sums. On the whole the news was a relief, the reward of her own perspicacity. Moment by moment the prospect grew brighter. It was Clorinda who startled them all. She had lain unsleeping, picturing the morrow with all its opportunities, and also hearing the outer bell clanging below in the courtyard, rose swiftly and flowed silently downstairs. It might be *him* . . .

She had his flowers, withered dry by now, grasped in one hand, and her arresting hair was at sixes and sevens about her face.

The news imparted, even Thisbe recoiled, for the apparition — Clorinda always looked six feet high in her nightgown — hovered, stared very dreadfully at her sisters, and emitted a thin wail most pitiful to hear. Thisbe, staring, thought her rather mad, this tall, haunted creature in white, clutching dead flowers to its heart. Ophelia had she lived . . . ageing and witless . . .

She moved, looking dazed, and suddenly screamed, 'He will die.'

'Oh no, he won't, Clo, much too tough,' prophesied Thisbe, grimly. Clorinda sought for words.

'You see, he's escaped us,' she said, speaking carefully, like a drunken man.

Thisbe looked sharply at her. 'He *did*, you know. Clo, *are you beginning to remember?*' Their audience of sister and servant was forgotten.

'No, I don't remember.'

'You must! or you couldn't have said that. He's found one way

out; it wasn't the way I was expecting, but he's found a way, don't you see? It may be a good thing. It may mean the child won't get him, now.'

'He's gone,' explained Clorinda, conversationally.

'Oh no, my dear, he hasn't.'

'They've been waiting for me.'

'*They?* Who?' Thisbe's voice was harsh with an anxiety new in her experience as she eyed her sister.

'It's come, Prince. I'd better go and meet it.'

'Meet *what*, Clo?'

Even the cat was marvellously still, withdrawn and watchful, every hair of his tail thickened, eyes narrowed, gazing fixedly through open door to the great staircase beyond. The voice went on.

'His slippers didn't fit me. *They never have.*'

'No, no . . . naturally not.' By now Thisbe was seriously alarmed; even the Page's face was chalk-white. Clorinda was looking demurely down at her dead flowers. 'I'll see if I have the next dance free, and the one after supper. How naughty! It'll look quite marked.' Then, her voice rising to a scream, 'He didn't dance with me! *He never did.* Why? Why? At *his* party . . .'

It was the Page who took her arm, she lingering, protesting, crying a little, seeking to the last to explain to those who were, after all, her nearest.

'Don't argue with 'er. No, Miss Cin, you keep off.'

Thisbe rallied. 'You talk as though Miss Clorinda were insane,' she protested. The youth's sandy eyebrows vanished into his hair. 'Ain't she? I seen 'em like this. It's shock what done it. Better lemme go for the doctor.' Clorinda's powerful grip tightened on his skinny arm. 'No! The doctor will be needed for *him*. And tell them to stop that music! They're playing the waltz we were to have danced.' And again, on a rising note, 'It's come! I must go and meet it. You might have been here to help me, Prince. . . .'

She tore herself from the Page's restraining grasp and made off towards the stairs. His hesitation of unpreparedness was only fractional, and his hoarse shout galvanized even Thisbe though it

failed to arouse her father from his brandy sleep. ‘She’s goin’ to do away with ’erself. Look sharp!’

Together, a grotesque pair, they scrambled up the endless flights of stairs.

They caught Clorinda on the attic floor as she clambered over the rickety banisters. It was a drop of perhaps ninety feet to the marble flagstones of the hall.

The fresh news, excitement pyramiding, was all over the village by milk-time next day. It was a heavy worry to the elder Mr. Charming, chained to The Palace in the bogus throes of his illness, but about the sanest uneasiness he had so far experienced in Daisy-down. You knew where you were with tangible mental cases: it was when they passed for sane that bewilderment set in, and the poor creature would probably recover, at that. But he chafed for a professional look at Clorinda, all the same.

The village, or was it his imagination? was eyeing him oddly when, after weeks of seething inactivity, he motored slowly through it, propped on pillows as became one new-snatched from death. Some avoided his eye and feebly raised hat, others showed a tendency to some incoherent, general, amorous congratulations in respect of one of the Baron’s daughters: a few cut him stonily, many gaped, puzzled, and the majority, as he complained to Mrs. Beech, seemed to stop whatever they were doing or saying on his approach and crystallize into something else, reverting to their own normality, which he found more disturbing than any friendly gesture.

‘You’ve stymied them,’ decided Alison.

‘You mean? Like the cat, and Honourable Thisbe when you tried to talk dumb?’

‘Yes.’

‘Gosh. I give it up.’

‘I don’t!’

‘Then I won’t.’

‘Bless you, Prince.’

‘As a matter of fact, while I’ve bin laid by, here, I’ve bin thinkin’

rather a lot, Alison, and a great deal of it is strictly speaking right out of my province and may sound like I'm not right in the head, either.'

'Oh no, it won't. Because I've been thinking, too, my dear, and for much longer than you, about Daisydown, and *nothing* you've ever thought can possibly be as far-fetched and crazy as what *I've* got!'

'Well . . . shoot!'

S C E N E 9

I

FOR perhaps the fiftieth time Mrs. Durden emerged from her cottage and inspected her small domain. She was no gardener, but even to her flummoxed eye it seemed to be doing unusually well, which was gratifying, except for the fact that for her life she didn't know what these promising green growths might be going to turn into. Was it something tasty and therefore money-saving, or was it weeds? Did you boil or burn it? Would weeds grow to such a height? They *looked* like beans, but you never knew. They'd certainly taken hold, no mistake about that. If they were weeds they'd better shrivel off, for they'd ousted what was left of the beets and carrots any old how. If they *were* beans it might be worth doing something about it.

She gibbered, uncertain, between the clumps, her carpet-slippers sinking into the soft earth, the trailing vegetation embracing her scarlet stockings. It was at the very moment that she had decided upon a bonfire of the whole dubious mess that from the cottage next door the owner, watching interestedly, advised 'Stick 'em up.' Obedient, and distressingly *cinéma*-conscious (as are we not all?), the widow raised both hands above her head, then perceiving her mistake, lowered them, hugged her lean bosom and laughed very heartily.

A few weeks before Prince Charming and Mrs. Beech were engaged in a conversation which must have convinced any eavesdropper, had there been one, that they were qualifying for a permanent asylum in a mental Home, and even as Mrs. Durden bedazledly inspected her unaccountable garden, the Ministry of Crops, awoke to the fact that war might spell a food-shortage, that what the English people ate was not exclusively out of tins and on pink points, but that in pink point of fact a vast source of interference might have been overlooked by its innumerable sub-departments. It inaugurated that campaign by which farmers were urged, cozened, cautioned and variously predicamented into ploughing up half their arable land for wheat and causing their cornfields to revert to grazing and growing the ungrowable. This kept them admirably and spectacularly active and gave their wives a different view out of their farm windows every three months or so, as they frantically packed eggs warm from the nest to be taken to a sorting-depôt where they were overlooked in the excitement, duly addled, and in the proper time formally condemned by the sanitary authorities, while the farmwives ate eggs from China and Peru in considerable astonishment at the power and variety of their flavours, though they delighted the Princess Soshi. But war, of course, is stern reality, and if it was helping to beat the Germans to have to give away your surplus butter because you mayn't sell it though they were crying out for it in the towns, why all was for the best.

The farmers, in short, proved a splendid and hitherto untapped source of fun to the Government. It was not to be expected that Daisydown should be left unmolested by Whitehall, and the local farmers were soon busily planting sugar-beet in indicated areas most obviously unsuitable, and occasionally indulging in a little somewhat unpatriotic and insubordinate suicide, bankruptcy and emigration, while their hinds, stamped into demanding two pounds ten shillings a week, very quickly organized themselves to agitate for lower wages, the higher figure having placed them at once in the

taxable class and thrown them out of employment by farmers who could no longer afford their services. It was, said the British public, who wasn't being well paid to govern the country, as good as a pantomime.

Wherefore, even Mrs. Durden, gibbering over her beans, knew enough to suspect a thoroughly good catch in it when an unknown car marked PRIORITY: M.O.C. upon its windscreens drove with sickening slowness past her own humble gate, and, more sickeningly still, stopped and disgorged an unknown gentleman in a bowler carrying a dispatch case, and an extremely modish and alarming young lady with silk-clad ankles like rhubarb, whom he bafflingly addressed as Clara, yet who took notes in an artful-looking book quite like a private secretary, though in full spate of silver fox stole.

He sketched a raising of the bowler, for the village woman was obviously poor and these are democratic times, and, referring to a sheaf of terrifying typewritten sheets, stated rather than asked 'Mrs. Durden?'

Mrs. Durden rolled her arms in her apron. 'Now you'll have to ask me to excuse you, but I'm afraid I haven't the pleasure,' she answered.

'I'm from the Ministry of Crops. I just want to find out what you're doing about intensive cultivation, whether your land is leasehold or freehold, what acreage, together with particulars of average yield and nature of crops.'

'You wouldn't like to count me camisoles, b'any chance?' responded Mrs. Durden, roguishly acid.

'Oh, come come, we're not so bad as that, I hope,' humoured the gentleman, hating her. And his eye fell at random upon the mass of tangled vegetation.

It sometimes happens that Government officials know a little about the work into which they have, through circumstances beyond their control or even wish, been posted as specialists. This knowledge is not always, or indeed often, result of their sojourn with their appointment, which can, indeed, be a mere matter of

clerical skirmishing round the edges of their subject, whose ramifications blind them successfully to the main issue that in itself is often a relatively simple matter. But in the case of Mrs. Durden's official, one must trace the workings of chance which led him to professional ecstasy and to all that was to come of it. He was a quite important figure in the Ministry of Crops, but it happened that his boyhood had been spent in a developed portion of England upon the Bakerloo line, and his parents had had a small garden, the be-all and end-all of the family week-end. He knew good beans when he saw them: he even remembered cautious, respectable poverty and contrivance. And quite suddenly he mentally telescoped these things, and like a capricious voter at the eleventh hour, came out solid for Mrs. Durden, and began to praise her as extravagantly as he could, and was, empowered to rebuke and cow and threaten.

'This crop,' he began.

Mrs. Durden became alarmed. 'I was jus' goin' to—,' she began, hoping to convince of her sincere determination to burn the whole blooming lot, and chance it. But luckily Government representatives do not like and are not accustomed to interruption.

'I take it you have achieved this result singlehanded?' he asked, beginning to be quite awful with a pencil and another typewritten sheet.

And then it all came back to Mrs. Durden: that festive night at The Pig in a Poke and her own unsteady return, singing and even dancing, culminating in that wild challenge to fate in casting to the winds those malignant beans exchanged by Jack for Buttercup, the cow. And here they were, up, to get her into further trouble, probably ending in a fine that would be the finish of her and the boy. This, she thought, was just the very thing that would never have happened to the late widow Twankey.

Emma Durden was no liar. Her fibs and distortions of the truth and rococo inventions were, as has been stated, essentially the results of wishful thinking, harming nobody and entertaining many. And at that moment a second crashing memory returned to her, of further beans which were recklessly spilled on that same night, and here was that fellow talking.

'And that this crop is yours?'

'I planted 'em all,' she almost shouted in her mounting agitation, 'if you can call it plantin', the way I did it.'

'A little thickly sown, certainly, but thinning out and sticking . . .' He stopped, arrested by her guiltily rolling eye, followed it to where her regard cast anchor in the adjacent and once-derelict allotment which, as in her own plot, was now aswarm with lusty growth.

'And that land is yours as well, I take it?'

Mrs. Durden threw up the sponge.

'No it ain't, Mister. That's just it. But I bin and planted there without askin'.'

'And you did it all?'

'I did. I'll go quietly,' riposted the widow with the jauntiness of despair. She turned to the intermittent Clara, whose elegant rhubarb ankles were by this time sinking fast in the too-fertile earth. 'Never get talkin' after closing-time to a Marine. Soldier *and* sailor too, they are, I give you *my* word. You stick to Night Clubs and gigglers, Miss, and then you won't be liable to get doing things you don't remember next morning.' Failing to recognize that it was to gigolos the widow referred, the note-taking elegance, in that skimmed voice which is what the rate-payer, at most, receives for his unwilling outlay, emitted 'Pardon? I'm afreyed I didn't ketch.' But the gentleman was monopolizing her; she was now, and for the moment, Miss Phillips. 'Take this, Miss Phillips.' Like the English, she could take it. It began: 'In re M.O.C. Section DX Ref: 1024 B', while Mrs. Durden stood waiting to be arrested, or at the least charged for trespass, damage and misappropriation.

He turned to her. 'Well, you've done excellently, Mrs. Dibdin — Dobbin — oh, sorry, Durden. I'm impressed. All this and single-handed, *and* without compulsion. Just using your sense and energy. Fine beans, too. Good thick pods there, I fancy. Some say plant sparsely, but that's exploded, as you know. My father planted as you do — thick, and when they've taken hold and not before they're two foot above ground, thinned. They encourage each other in the growing season. Healthy competition. And reclaiming that allotment, too . . . well, I wish these young Land Girls could

come and take a few lessons from you in energy and enterprise, *and* patriotism. Must have cost you quite a lot, too.'

The widow's face seamed with distress and a backwash of remembered fury. 'It cost me all I've got,' she said grimly, 'my son sold the cow to get them beans.'

The official gazed at her, stunned with esteem, and even the intermittent Clara looked friendly.

Mrs. Durden now saw not only that Holloway was receding but that for some reason she was a remarkable woman in high favour and a skilled gardener. The visitors having departed, she sank, a bouillabaisse of emotional reaction and assorted perplexity to which ingredients swank prepared to add itself, upon the milking-stool, thought of her mother, muttered long and disjointedly, and raising her muslin bonnet rang her handbell to that sacred memory.

III

But if Mrs. Durden imagined that this was the end of the matter, she had grossly underestimated the resources of Government departments. True, for a month she was left to watch her beans springing and podding and growing so tall that Jack had to take a step-ladder when it came to the tieing and sticking, and there was in addition all that business going on in the allotment for which she had been made to feel responsible; and so the evenings were spent in stooping and stretching and fiddling and thinning, and what to do with the thinnings heaven and God might know but Mrs. Durden didn't, as, hot and aching, she sourly surveyed the whole damnable plethora. And then Whitehall got busy and for the next few weeks her soul belonged to anybody you like, and even to those you don't, except herself, and when she wasn't panting and watering and hoeing she was indoors wielding an implement far more tricksy and blooming and blasted — the pen, in the filling in of innumerable printed forms which, addressed sanely enough to Mrs. and Emma Durden, proceeded to ask if she were male or female and if a widow (and therefore not a male) why and when and how and where, and

addressing the missive correctly to Mosscrop Cottage, Daisydown, required her (overleaf) to state her full address (in block letters).

But the village rallied round her, in the intervals of parting with four points for a small tin of American baked beans. After work they would troop, singing, uphill to the Durden cottage and fall to on the bean-rows, while Mrs. Durden, running with what she had to offer, seriously inconvenienced progress at crucial moments, and fell off ladders with mugs of cider and fell into baskets with wedges of seed-cake and measured her length on two occasions over the watering-can and pulled up an entire row under the impression that it was ripe for transplanting, to the hilarity of everyone, while Jack encouraged the workers with quip and smitten shoulder, and led the community singing and sang a variety of eupptic solos, and the evacuees, in coloured smocks, perseveringly danced, until stray cars fleeting by to coast, London, or road house, slowed to admire and stare, and in one case exclaim 'What *are* those people rehearsing?' before assuming that it was one of those village Drama Leagues of which one read in the newspapers.

Only one discordant note, indeed, was struck during this period. It arose through the surly curiosity of Devlin and the sunny helpfulness of Queenie Good, who, as she merrily tied and raked and identified herself with the Durden beanstalks, brought not only gratification to everyone but its own reward as well, in that she actually began and even completed three separate solos (including *Down the Vale* and *Homing*) without hindrance. But with the appearances, sudden and disconcerting, of Devlin, who would rise up as it seemed from the very earth, or emerge unsuspected from amidst the thickest bean-row, harmony was jangled. The villagers by now accepted it that this particular social combination would never blend, but it never seems to have occurred to any of them to enquire the reason. One fact alone was obvious, that Devlin resented anybody getting ahead in the world while he could not, and the menace of the harvest of this crop of vegetables might place the Durdens at least for a time on Easy Street, and in the category which can treat at the Inn, and therefore patronize you. Had there not been the precedent of the late widow Twankey? On

the other hand, they argued at bar and in parlour, you couldn't rightly compare a gold lamp with a bean crop, however flourishing, so Devlin didn't have no call to be all that spiteful. And the angrier Devlin waxed the more partisan and pro-Durden became Miss Good, as Mrs. Beech faithfully observed, when on her evening strolls, and it was, as she related to Prince Charming, the old story: perfectly modern wrangles with the Good always on the verge of ceasing to be the perfect lady, and always at her own appearance among them to lend a hand, turning unnatural and meretricious.

He assented, depressed. For the case of the Honourable Clorinda weighed upon him. He had, after his faked convalescence, seen her, gone ostensibly to the Hall to leave his card and Earle's upon the family; Alison, too, had dropped in, and they still differed in their findings, he asserting that she was genuinely deranged, she maintaining that, in her own sense, Clorinda never had been normal and therefore was not now insane. It was a question of all the problems that Daisydown presented to its chosen which was to remain for ever unanswered. For their comfort, it is a question which nobody ever has been able to answer definitely.

I V

When Derek and Doris had left the Vicarage and returned to London Mrs. Beech and Prince saw them off. 'I'd have to in any case, but it may give us something,' she said.

It did. To their supersensitized, Daisydown-steeped perceptions; for Derek was solicitous of his sister in the way of chocolate from the automatic machine, the safety of her doll and even the adult thought of a corner seat for her right up to the moment they entered the train. But as it moved away from the little platform, the youngsters were clearly heard and seen to start a squabble, and Derek to snatch the chocolate and push his sister out of sight as the engine rounded the curve. . . .

'H'm . . .' Alison and Prince looked at each other,

'It all fits in,' she added.

'You mean, once on the train they're off Daisydown territory and are turning back into normal kids?'

'Exactly. They did it sometimes, even here. One night when we came back from the toyshop; I'd been slating them for showing off, and for a few minutes they sulked, like *real* children.'

And then Devlin materialized from behind some churns and was politer than Mrs. Beech would have believed possible.

'Ah. So they've gone. I reckon you'll miss 'em. Nice little nippers, I always thought 'em,' and touching his matted forelock he shambled off.

The children were safely despatched. They had outstayed their original time and welcome by several months, but as their mother put it in her letter of thanks to her sister, 'I have never known the dear Babes to take such a fancy to any place; your Daisydown seems to have regularly got hold of them.' (And she never spoke a truer word than that, caustically interpolated Alison, as she flung Derek's forgotten ukulele into the dustbin.) And from that morning both she and Prince felt that at last they were coming to grips with the whole place; accepting the theory of possession of persons by localities, their ideas and suspicions found root, and grew and spread — like the Durden beans — until they culminated in mutual confession.

S C E N E 10

I

FROM the open window of the Vicarage drawing-room drifted in the odour of wallflowers and alyssum, blending with the distant cries and singing from the bean-gatherers up at the Durden cottage, as Mrs. Beech and Prince Charming once more sat debating their matter. The Vicar was taking his Young Women's Bible Class and would not return for another two hours. It was past eight o'clock as they settled into armchairs, but coffee had been served by the

maid, Marian, Prince been plied with cigarettes and allowed his cheroots, and there was no longer excuse for silence.

'You begin,' said Mrs. Beech, with the generosity of funk. Prince sat up and flicked ash into the grate.

'Well . . . I guess I first began to get a line on this village when I paid these visits to the pantomime, Alison, or rather, to suspect there was a line to get. And it looks t'me as if the folk here are so suggestible that they're now in a chronic state of actin' out the Cinderella story. That's point one. If so, that leads me to wonder what other tales they're putting on as well in their daily life. As I told you, I didn't take in but the two shows because it got me nervous by reason it was so like Baron's family, here.' He looked almost accusingly at her. 'But there *were* others. *What are they?*'

Alison tried to meet his eye as she faltered 'There's *Jack and the Beanstalk*', and an extra loud outburst of mirth from the Durden cottage came in through the casement.

'And what did *he* do?'

'Exchanged his cow for beans because he was an ass.'

'My soul! And had a widow mother called Durden, I bet.'

'Yes, but she was called Dame Durden; Prince, and the beanstalk grew up into the clouds —'

'You mean they grew tall just like Mrs. Durden's?' he cut in acidly.

'No. I *don't*. They *did* grow into the clouds and Jack climbed them and found a castle and a giant called Blunderbore, and he killed the giant and brought down bags of gold.'

Prince mopped his forehead. 'Oh. Just kid's stuff. Anything more?'

'*Aladdin*. He parted with a magic lamp to his wicked uncle, *but* he found a cave full of jewels,' extenuated Alison, 'and *Little Red Riding Hood* had a wolf grandmother —'

'Lycanthropy', diagnosed Prince in a mechanically professional aside, 'I known cases in the Adirondacks — but go on.'

'There's *Dick Whittington* —'

'What?'

'I know! But *he* went to Morocco. Ours never did. And there's *The Sleeping Beauty*, but *she* had a wicked fairy godmother who wasn't asked to the christening, and enchanted her.'

'You mean, they were on such bad terms the girl's mother was mighty glad to knock her off the list?'

'No. She just wasn't asked, or came late, or something, and got spiteful and put a spell on the baby and she slept for years and years until the Prince kissed her.'

'Which prince? Do I get another break there?' Charming's voice was hoarse with anxiety.

'No, I don't think so. Just any old fairytale prince.'

'But Alison, what beats me is your *knowing* all these pantomime people right here in Daisydown and never thinkin' it remarkable.'

'Well, I did, at first. It was amusing and a coincidence to have a Durden and a Twankey and a Whittington, but I thought it *was* only coincidence: English country names *are* odd, Prince, and we haven't got 'em all, you know. We've no Robinson Crusoe or Ali Baba or Goldilocks or Snow White, though I admit there are four perfectly harmless and normal families called Twoshoes and Blue and Boopeep and Muffet — I suppose it was originally Moffat, but that might happen in any village. Boopeep as a probably corrupted surname isn't much odder than Brodribb, or Catchlove (which is East Anglian), or Sowerbutts, that is North Country. As for Aladdin, it is a Christian name in Italy. When Arthur and I were in Perugia and Cutigliano we met two boys called *Aladdino*. And as for Cinderella and Clorinda and Thisbe, I assumed from the first that their mother was a pantomime-lover or had a sense of fun. Why not? The Cinderella of the story was fair-haired and pretty, so was her baby; and as for the stepsisters, taken separately and without farcical associations, they are perfectly reasonable. Clorinda no doubt figures in dozens of novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and Thisbe is in Shakespeare.'

'Then, if you accepted all that, Alison, without bein' knocked out at the queerness of it, what gets you about Daisydown? What's your theory of the place?'

She looked absently out of the window. The dusk was falling, and the voices up the hill faint now, and intermittent.

'What worried me was when I first noticed how they began to resemble their pantomime namesakes. Prince, I believe that certain

people here in Daisydown are, however remotely, descendants of certain characters in pantomime as we know it, and that they are still experiencing a version of their original destinies.'

'He stared at her as she continued. 'Remember, these pantomime figures are based on real people who must once have lived somewhere. And they aren't living entirely according to their stories here in Daisydown because conditions have changed and they're twentieth century. Don't you see how that might account for things which have bothered and baffled both of us? That half their lives are lived instinctively and involuntarily according to saga, and the other half must feel its way about, and often be defeated by, the modern world?

Take yourself and Cinderella. She married you, in the story, but you (of English descent, remember) got re-born in America where Prince and Earle are very usual Christian names, as you know, and you were able to circumvent fate by cancelling the ball. Or take my feeling about Mrs. Durden having a perfectly sane tea-table instead of a comic one that collapsed. I was expecting nothing but her *pantomime* interior, forgetting that she was once some Durden who in course of time filtered into pantomime and became debased, like the Harlequinade, which is far, far older than the Italian puppet-show and *fantoccini*; actually it's older than the Bible. It traces back to mythology . . . It's inconceivable that the Durdens should never have existed, because as a laugh-raiser the surname isn't remotely amusing: and has it ever been explained why our way of indicating that we've given somebody a bad time should be "I gave him beans"?

'Or take Clorinda's answer to me about her song, *Sandbag Sally*. "We sing them, you know, we sing them." I believe that she was subconsciously half-remembering that middle phase in her evolution, after she had stopped being a Clorinda of some English town or village and before she became the Clorinda of Daisydown that we know, when she was, as it were, forced into the theatre to be for all time a symbol of unwanted, ugly womanhood.'

'Well . . . gosh!'

'Then there's another point which may or may not bear on the

case; in our pantomimes, the Clorindas and Thisbes are traditionally played by men: so is Cinderella's cat.'

'Meaning, Honourable Clorinda's a hermaphrodite?'

Alison smiled. 'That, I'm afraid, will remain her secret. She may by now be a spiritual one, or be just what she seems, a person who is a natural tomboy and was brought up among servants in the kitchen and stables. But she is also a woman who can love and suffer. She loves you, Prince, my dear. You get hints of it in the pantomime underneath all that slapstick. I often think those ugly sisters, as we chivalrously call them, must have suffered agonies of humiliation at his party. And that's why the Hall depresses me, and always has, and now I know the reason. The Baron's family may be folk-lore descendants, as I believe, but as a family you can match them all over England: a collection of relations, herded together without enough money or any outlet, including matrimony, for their energies, and stewing in a swamp of jealousies and hatreds and petty cruelties. . . .'

Prince nodded. 'True for you. But where do *we* come in?'

'I was coming to that. For a long time, now, I've been wondering if I had any place in their story, but it looks as if I hadn't. I'm just the Vicar's wife — there must always have been one, the church is a pretty ancient institution, though it's not as old as pantomime! But *you* have your place here, and they feel it. Yet because this is the twentieth century, they're uncertain of their former hold on you. Also, being moderns as well, they're seeing you with fresh eyes as one who might, as it were, do anything out of his part and in his own right. . . .

'I think they feel that I've no share in their lives: that I'm a sort of eternal audience, and this may be why they've such a tendency to "do their stuff" when I'm about. I caught out Jack Durden that way, once, when he was being more gallant and debonair and kickable than usual; I went one better over his silly songs and he hated it. It jerked him into his modern self, which is a perfectly unremarkable village young man. It scared him. He sensed that I'd intruded into his other life without an apparent right . . . he forgot that middle-link of pantomime which gave me the advantage of him. And I've

done the same thing once or twice with Derek and Doris, too, and although I didn't then realize what I'd fluked into, I always enjoyed flummoxing the little brutes!

'These people don't know what they're doing or why they're doing it, but they have a common bond. It's like a Masonic Lodge. When you came here, I had a suspicion that you "belonged". It dismayed me, Prince, and just as with the children, I watched you beginning to play *their* game the moment you were attracted by Cinderella. I told myself that any normal man would be, but when you announced the ball and gave her the slippers, I knew you were in it. The place was too strong for you. It's true there wasn't any godmother-down-chimney-cum-pumpkin-coach-and-rats nonsense, any more than there's a giant and sacks of gold for the Durdens, so I suppose that the original stories are degenerating with the march of time — or that their adaptability to change is a sign of their eternal quality.'

'Well . . . I can take most things, Alison, but what about that evening I was in the forest and I knocked a tree trunk and it *bent*, gave, like canvas?'

'I've thought that out. We don't know what supernormal law you got in touch with then, and probably never will. But the only explanation I've got is that you as Charming, an American, were connected in that place with your original, Prince Charming, and set for a few seconds in the middle-stratum of the story, when it had ceased to be legend and before it had begun to be modern. In those moments you were, in fact, in its theatre stratum, and the tree bent because it *was* canvas.'

'Oh come, Alison!'

She moved to the bookcase and extracted a small volume. 'This is from a ghost story called *An Echo*, by H. R. Wakefield. "It was at about a quarter past four . . . that I knew, as I walked along a ride through Long Bottom Wood, that I was once again to be projected into a Fourth Dimension . . . At irregular intervals I am compelled, though with extreme reluctance, to witness supernatural phenomena. Every haunted place seems longing to reveal its secret to me . . . The preliminary symptoms are always the same. Suddenly every sound,

from the loudest to the softest, seems frozen in dreadful suspense . . . simultaneously everything is dimmed — a consistent toning down of every shade. It is as though I am gazing through one of those glasses used by artists when painting outdoors in too dazzling a light, and the world becomes sullen, brassy, livid. I feel that I am both within and without the bounds of reality. . . .”

‘Something suggestive there, don’t you think? It occurred to me when you told me about your forest branch; but in its own right it’s a paragraph that has always struck me for its probable truth and its enormously subtle observation, more remarkable still if the story is fiction. Even I have noticed how at night the headlights of cars shining on passing scenery and foliage turn it into stage sets, so that you’d swear the trunks of trees were flat, and nothing behind them but struts and battens. You’ve gone a bit further than Wakefield, that’s all.’

Prince shook his head regretfully. ‘It’s funny, Alison, I can swallow Honourable Clorinda and the cat and your theory about the whole place, but that tree’s my dead spot. Like a case I once had — a woman — who could stand for witches and unicorns and even centaurs (she claimed she’d seen one in Greece), but she just couldn’t believe in mermaids. Oh, one more thing: this business when the folk here talk dumb. Well, in view of what you say about “the middle stratum”, I’ve a notion they’re acting up like they did in the show.’

‘You mean, talking in pantomime couplets? *Well!* . . . and yet why not?’

‘If your notion’s the right one, it’s subconscious memory functioning. I’ve had many a case of the most respectable people, includin’ ladies, who taught *me* what swearing was, under anaesthetic. They didn’t know the words in their everyday life, Alison; couldn’t have bin near such dirt. And yet up it came under external influence. Any plug G.P.’ll tell you the same. Take that evening when you spoke to Honourable Thisbe in the street an’ she sheered off as if she’d been shot —’

‘I know, I know! But I wasn’t even trying to “talk dumb” then, Prince. When we *did* try, nothing happened.’

'Because we didn't know how to. But with Honourable Thisbe you seem to have gotten the hang of it by accident. What you said was: "We must get on, dinner's already late and Arthur will be in a fearful state." Break that up, and you get:

"We must get on, dinner's already late,
And Arthur will be in a fearful state".

'Ahh — h . . . ?

'An' the reason they don't do it all the time squares with your theory about their modernity. I take it that this Masonic lingo of theirs only comes uppermost in emotional stress, or when you take 'em unawares — '

'— and possibly because their theatre phase impels them to do their stuff as descendants, however degenerate and modernized, of those entertainers.'

'Quite so. It may be protective or it may be demonstrational. What I'd like, Alison, is to take Mrs. Durden, Jack, the Twankeys and a few others to the pantomime, and watch the reaction.' Alison laughed. 'I don't think there'd be one. The modern side of them would be sitting by you, the side of them that's accustomed to pantomime. Besides, you've got to remember that, as villagers, they don't know their future, so how can they correlate what they see on the stage with their own lives and fates?'

'Then, what happens next? If I don't marry Honourable Cinderella and the Durdens don't kill a giant and the Twankeys don't make a strike with a cave of jewels, what's left?'

'Ask me another! I think we can assume that Cinderella will get away from the family (she's bound to outlive them all and have a life of her own, sooner or later, which is a point that the saga overlooked), and we've seen how Derek and Doris's saga ran to seed in that silly business with Devlin, who didn't really have a thing against them but had to conform to race-memory the moment they came to Daisydown, just as they did in being, or pretending to be, afraid of him. I think, sometimes, their fear *was* genuine, which was the old saga working out, but most of the time it was put on, which was the later, theatrical, phase intervening. And I

think we can assume that the Durdens will have at any rate an interval of better times financially, and that the stepsisters won't marry, poor wretches! It's a grudging age we live in, my dear, and we mustn't expect a literal happy-ever-after for any of 'em.

'And how I'm going to miss you, Prince! I couldn't have weathered it all with anybody else.'

'That's a very, very big tribute, Alison. I value it more than I can say. I shan't lose touch, and if I keep on The Palace it'll be simply to contact with you when I make my next trip.'

'How nice and lavish of you! But there *are* such things as spare bedrooms in Vicarages, you know.'

'You're sweet, Alison. And another thing: Keep me posted if anything new happens.'

'I will.'

'I'd like to read a paper at our Institute of Psychics on Daisydown, but trouble is they don't know your pantomime and wouldn't get the idea at *all*, and I don't rate high enough with the Supernormal profs to risk my Normal-Aberrations reputation.'

The sound of the Vicar's key in the lock was heard.

S C E N E 1 1

I

MRS. DURDEN was in a daze. That, for her, is saying much, in so far as this condition was so frequently the accompaniment of her progress through life and the thoughts and speech with which she faced the world, that it is implicit. This, however, was a very patriarch among dazes and to align it with those she was normally subject to is to do both her and her condition less than justice.

For, after having filled in official forms until her unready hand developed what she alternately alluded to as Housemaid's Knee and St. Vitus's Veins, it now seemed that in addition to being a veteran patriot of a remarkable order and an experienced gardener, she was,

out of that blue which is Whitehall, no less a personage than Regional Supervisor For Allotments, and the first woman ever to hold that position, as the London Press announced after it had filled her garden to suffocation with affable reporters and photographers who wellnigh trod her bean-rows back into their native origin, such was their professional determination to get a good, human story. And, lest this conveys a picture of ungentlemanly shoving and competitive chicanery, it must be stressed that, with the exception of two popular illustrateds, nothing was further from the truth; for whereas the representative of *The Sunday Times* knew and must adhere to the formula for conveying news items to its public, the reporter from *The Daily Mail* understood his own method of purveyance of the same titbit, while both comprehended to a nicety that baffling, anonymous abstraction termed Our Readers, and if they didn't, their editors were ever ready to replace their misled pens upon the suitable track.

Thus all saw Mrs. Durden through different eyes, interpreted her personality from different angles, while her ingenuous admission that the whole thing was a gigantic mistake and that she knew about as much of agriculture as would lie on a sixpence and still leave room for a portrait of Winston Churchill in the middle, was unanimously ignored, she now owning a post under Government, and when she stumbled and fell into the clothes-basket through sheer excitement and announced facetiously that she was disguised as a glass-cloth, *The Picture Page* saw the episode as:

WIDOW OF SIXTY-FOUR LEADS HAMLET WITH ALLOTMENT

SHE JOKES — BUT MEANS TO WIN THE WAR

The Post-Wire's version was:

VILLAGE WOMAN SELLS COW FOR BEANS

GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL AT SIXTY-FIVE

Supervisor of Crop Cultivation

The Morning Illustrated said:

'I'M A TERROR FOR GARDENING!'

FAME COMES TO COUNTRY MOTHER

She Runs Home On Runners

And not to be outdone, its bitter rival, *The Daily Snapshot*, had it:

WAS WITHOUT A BEAN
Now Controls Eight Fields
Elderly Invalid's Example

While *The Observer* contented itself with the well-bred information:

NEW APPOINTMENT
Woman Minister of Agriculture

As for the photographers, their efforts fairly romped with captions that ranged from *Mrs. Emma Durden At Home, She Has The Green Finger, Won't Desert Cottage, With Son, Jack, and Daisydown Heroine, to Enjoys Joke With Lord Woolton, Mrs. Durden Sets Off On War Duty, Reading Telegram From King to Shows Neighbours Her Garden.*

The second crop of photographs was taken exclusively with the cow. For, totally unable to do it herself, and her story becoming daily more widely known, Fleet Street, assisted by Scotland Yard, a detachment of Home Guard, Boy Scouts, and one Ace flyer of The Bomber Command who is believed to have first sighted the beast grazing two counties away and successfully identified her markings by aerial photography, traced Buttercup and restored her to the Durdens by public subscription at a ceremony attended by Lord Leverbrook, Lord Rathermere, Lord Beaverhume, the Mayor of Greater Daisydown, the Suffragan Bishop of the same and the entire population of the village, including Devlin, who attempted a disturbance and was removed by two warm-hearted sergeants of The East — Regiment, who nearly cried with gratified sentiment and indignation as they did so.

But quite apart from the excitement, vertigo, and liver induced by all this, greatly assisted as it was by inordinate treating at The Pig in a Poke which reduced Mrs. Durden to the last extreme of inconsequence, another and more durable aspect had, apparently, fallen to her portion. For not content with deluging her with fame and rendering her cottage as familiar to England as Buckingham Palace, The Ministry of Crops showered upon her sudden authority with an accompanying salary whose annual amount seemed to her,

as indeed it was, so preposterous that it set the final seal upon her incapacity to carry out to a conclusion even the simplest of private domestic jobs, and reduced her professional labours to the wavering and unintelligent inspection of the crops of those who were now by law constrained to endure it, an antick progress in which any self-betrayal whether of comment or deed was now accepted as the last word in gardening lore. And, as happens so often, beginner's luck was hers, as on the occasion when, her head splitting with stout, she saw two of every vegetable she endeavoured to focus, and in a morning-after fit of exasperation, cried aloud that she'd like to see the whole lot bunged off to the next parish, which was taken quite literally, and the crop transplanted to its infinite benefit and the increased esteem and reputation of the widow. And (for this it has been freely said is *A Relations' War*), a subordinate post was found for Jack at another large salary, who, officially acting under his mother, did most of the work, and began to look quite like a man for almost three-quarters of the time instead of for only half, as Mrs. Beech and Mr. Charming noted. ('He *was* a boy in the story, you see, and it was only in the middle, or stage, period that he became a girl', she elucidated for his alert interest.) And obstinate prosperity reigned in Mosscrop Cottage, and Miss Good was jubilant and the villagers sang louder and oftener and more indistinctly than ever, and Mrs. Durden, hypnotized by suggestion, emerged in one incredible uniform after another, and if they were of her own disordered design, no one in England could restrain her, she being the first woman to occupy that particular post.

And here let it be said, that in spite of all her wishful thinking and grandiose fancies, she was, when it became possible, wholly unable to uproot herself from her cottage and dwell in sixteen-room'd splendour elsewhere; nor, with mixed souvenirs of the late widow Twankey hot within her, did she tipple herself to death. The enjoyment of her prosperity was at all times to be conditioned by her limited experience of life, and expended itself mainly upon dress, the pleasures of the table, and ever-ready if unsystematic charity to all. It seems as though she had the sense to recognize that her thoughts were not Rolls-Royce and champagne, or her reactions

butler and Ascot, a circumstance which the Vicar rather touchingly alluded to in one of his sermons. ('But, after all,' thought his wife, listening in her pew beneath, and refusing once more to be bamboozled by conventional piety, '*what does any of us know of what happened to the real Dame Durden of the story? She was a good sort, too, so dear old Emma probably can't help following her general outlines.*')

II

And then to the village, super-saturated with sensation, came a further stir. For Earle, the younger Mr. Charming, eloped with the Baron's youngest daughter, Cinderella.

Prince was on the Vicarage wire three minutes later: a Prince in a new guise of raging relative, whose protestant shouts of indignation for several sentences defeated their own ends by being completely inaudible.

'It's the lack of *confidence* I can't stomach, Alison. Why, that kid and I were real pals, I was almost like a father to him. Pardon? . . . oh, he's through college all right, and doing fine for a junior in real estate. But at that he's only twenty-three. I won't stand for it! I'll wireless the boat and get 'em detained on Ellis Island. I'll —'

'One moment *please*, Prince. Listen. This mayn't be a bad thing. They're both young and healthy, she's well-born, and her title will help Earle in America: there's no money trouble and she's as pretty as paint —'

'— she's a moron.'

'Quite. But he's rescuing her from very real unhappiness.'

'Well . . . you've said something there, Alison, I'll allow.'

'And as her brother-in-law, any remaining danger that the story might get you in the end is removed for ever.'

'Better yet. But — what happens when those two start havin' children? Am I to stand by an' watch my own brother breeding future-Cinderellas that'll sit about in kitchens bein' kicked around by everybody?'

'You can't fight that, my dear. I take it that her story, in some

guise, will always be liable to recur, or again it may lie fallow for hundreds of years.'

'Then you suggest I accept the situation?'

'I honestly do.'

'Oh, an' by the way: can you take it? Earle's travelling the Page as well.'

'No!'

'Fact. Seems he couldn't be parted from Honourable Cinderella.'

'Well! . . . I must say I'm glad, Prince.'

'Oh, I don't say we can't stand for it, in a financial way, and I don't doubt a smart lad'll make the grade over home. But if my young man thinks he's goin' to settle right down with a brand-new bride to doin' no more work he's mistaken. Earle's going right on with his job same as I am with mine.'

'Good for you. I agree.'

'Oh, and Earle had the gall to send his love to you.'

'Bless him! Mine to him when you cable.'

'Me? Cable? Like hell I'll cable. Any case, I'll be seein' him soon enough, *and* Cinderella. Why, Alison, I sail, myself, in a fortnight!'

III

Through the forest a large cat padded, shoving his striped face against passing obstruction. For Tibbles the field-mouse squeaked in vain, that night, and from him small rabbits were immune. Methodically he trundled along under the bland midsummer moon. It was past eleven o'clock when, reaching the Vicarage and seeing no lights, he began, with system and crescendo and using his furred rump as a battering-ram, to thud for admittance, a ruse well-known at the Hall.

It was Alison, sleep-ridden, a little apprehensive but valiant still, who unbolted the door.

'Yes? Who—? Oh . . . my *poorest* boy!'

He leaned against her, looking up, pink mouth splitting explana-

tions, singularly like a cat. Then unerringly preceded her to her own kitchen and paused, looking up.

He lived at the Vicarage until his contented death.

I V

His imminent departure from Daisydown roused in the kindly heart of Prince Charming a desire to benefit the village, where, in spite of everything, he had enjoyed himself and received much hospitality, ranging from jewel-prized Bridge parties at the Twankeys to home-made seed cake and strong tea at the Durdens. With him, American as he was, discretion fought with nature (as it had with the father of Hamlet), and his ideas darted between a War Memorial dedicated to his father, Professor Temple Archer Charming, and a champagne supper to the entire neighbourhood, with a floor show and talkies thrown in.

He took the question — their last council of war — to the Vicarage, and as once before Mrs. Beech said ‘Make it a ball’. Vestiges of apprehension suffused his face, and she met them squarely. ‘Now Cinderella is accounted for and off our bones — ’

‘ — but there’s still Honourable Clorinda — ’

‘My dear, she’s dotty, at least the village says she is, which amounts to the same thing. There’d be a real scandal if she engaged herself to you, led by the Chapel. They’re very Mosaic, unlike the Roman Catholics, who say quite openly that it’s far more meritorious to have idiot children, so long as they’re R.C.s too, than none.’

‘But, there’s Honourable Thisbe. I’ve sometimes thought she — ’

‘So have I! But she’d marry *anybody* — I don’t mean to be rude. I tell you what! Make your party in honour of Mrs. Durden. She’s safe, and a dear, and it would be nice to congratulate her publicly. *We* shall know she’s the biggest impostor on earth, even for a Government specialist, but she knows it too, and never asked for it, and we both adore her and the county’ll be indulgent because democracy’s in the air, and the villagers’ll be flattered to pieces at

your friendliness, and I'll chaperone you violently the whole evening if the need arises.'

'Alison, you're great!' muttered Mr. Charming with profound affection, his released mind already with florist and caterer (but he'd hire another florist, this time, and no bouquets to anyone, except, of course, Mrs. Durden, and perhaps a spray to Lady St. Cope, who couldn't easily make a pass at him across an invalid chair, and was a matron, anyway).

S C E N E 12

I

• THEY talk about Prince's ball and The Palace scene still, in Daisy-down. Magnificent as anything yet given by the Twankeys, it at the same time evaded that slightly ostentatious and Oriental taint which too often distinguished the gatherings of the latter couple. For, say what you will (a point the Princess Soshi was never to grasp, and which only a knowledge of her foreign origin protected her from being cut by the county), no British Master of Foxhounds appreciates being ogled at the very buffet by authentic Eastern houris, however automatically he is prepared in his own time and in his own manner to seduce the family housemaid.

Between them, Charming and Mrs. Beech contrived an evening at once typically English and untypically opulent. Not only did the proportions of The Palace itself invite display, but with searing memories of what he had suffered, it was Prince's grim humour to reproduce, as well as his recollection served, those gaudy and glittering features which distinguished most of the acts and above all the final scene in the pantomime he had witnessed in London. He was genuinely anxious to do his guests honour, but in his decorative scheme, a substratum of rancour at all they had made him go through, of baffled bedazement and human apprehensions whose comparative sanity was counterbalanced by their acuteness, found

vent, and in recreating the entrance hall and its grand staircase he subtly felt that he was getting a bit of his own back; also, as he informed Mrs. Beech, it would be instructive to note the reaction.

He caused the splendid old pillars of cedar wood, hewn from trees in their gracious middle age what time Drake was sighting the Armada, to be wrapped in gilded Lincrusta, and banked with ornate plaster receptacles foaming with pink linen hyacinths; a circular fountain spouting real water coloured by submerged lighting in its bowl filled the recess under the branching staircase, while his excellent tapestry curtains now gave way to heavily spangled drapes in dead white, and gilded cardboard pelmets. From the grand old vaulted roof he suspended festoons of electric light. The staircase itself he faced with false treads of dead white boarding and carpeting of Aubusson pink (to match the hyacinths). The hired waiters wore plush livery of rose and cream with vast aiguillettes (to complement the sequins) and their heads were dusted with gilt powder (to harmonize with the pillars). 'And,' said Prince, an incongruous figure in correct evening dress as he led Alison round on the night of the ball, 'I shall talk dumb if I want to.'

'God,' murmured the Vicar's wife appreciatively, as she took it all in.

It had been her own idea to wear a gown of *vieux rose*, 'because, you know, I *am* one of the principals, and they always tone in unless they're the low comedy leads', she had begged. 'And if the band doesn't play *Fame and Glory* while you receive I shall die of disappointment. All my life I've wanted to make an entrance to heavenly tow-row music like that, only one's chances in the church are practically nil. Yes, you know the march I mean. It goes,

LI—te—*tootle-tottle* TAR—tay
Oh te—*tum-tum tay tar Tee* (*Pom, pom*)

and it rises to a really grandiose climax that always makes me snivel, and suggests beautifully produced processions and The Kingly Idea, and it's my conception of The Last Day and the Remission of Sins, with its triumphant brass and drums . . . and, Prince, do get your horrible funkeys whom I simply adore to call

out my name loud. One *could* only Flunk in those liveries; any decent footman would swoon in his tracks if expected to wear them (only they ought to have been in cheap white wool wigs, my dear, of the Wardour Street epoch, or Second House Empire). But I'm glad to see their stockings are wrinkling a bit, that's very typical, especially in suburban pantomime. And now (no, Prince, it isn't the Doxology), I shall withdraw into your study until They begin to arrive, and *don't* forget: *Fame and Glory*, and don't let the band swindle out *Madame Butterfly* or any nonsense of that kind. Oh, I am enjoying myself! and I feel so well-dressed, and in sympathetic lights nice-looking, forbye, though what I shall turn into when you lower your hokey-pokey festoons only my Maker knows.'

Both Alison and Prince were a little light-headed with fatigue, anticipation, and the enormous relief that was the safe and distant removal of Cinderella from the scene. The ball, they now felt, could be just *a* ball, and not the fateful apotheosis and loss of freedom of Daisydown's most flamboyantly eligible bachelor . . . and they could relish it, he and Alison, from the depths of their shared, secret knowledge and experience.

II

Half an hour later, to the rousing rhythms of *Fame and Glory*, while the festoons of lights were lowered to form a symmetric pattern, Alison descended the pink and white staircase, slowly, savouring every moment, enchanted when the assembled guests looked up in greeting . . . soon, too soon, she would have reached the lowest stair and must merge with the crowd (*But I'll collar a front place, for all that*, she murmured).

It was then that for a moment she received an impression of old familiarity: that quite suddenly she was in the finale of a pantomime: that the wall which faced her across the hall was in point of fact not there but barred by a conductor waving a bâton and fading off into vistas of darkened audience. But then, how many times had

she not felt, in the theatre, that she was in a large private house, and that these descending guests were at an authentic ball? That the scrolled and ornate doors left and right led in very sooth to a buffet and conservatory instead of to struts and battens, brick wall, and men in shirtsleeves removing 'props'? But at least this Prince's ices would be genuine and not wisps of pink cotton wool glued on to containers of papier mâché!

The impression faded as she neared the lowest step, scanned the guests: the Poynters and Whittingtons in formal if slightly démodé evening dress (Arthur, arriving later, would be a little, and incurably, creased at the knees), and Lady St. Cope, unsuitably handsome and distinguished in amethyst and impeccable pearls, controlled and gracious as she talked to her host. And the villagers . . . they too helped to disperse illusion . . . stiff in dress and manner, grouped without purpose . . . protectively huddling . . . Mr. Prune in tails in which he commonly acted as auxiliary waiter at local dinner parties, his unhappy red hands hovering of instinct to non-existent apron pockets, as he talked, subdued, to Mrs. Ridinghood in semi-evening cornflower silk, his shyness such that affable remarks from the gentry he answered direct to his wife, though * cheerful loquacity's self in his shop. Mrs. Muffet in her best afternoon voile, whispering to an over-maquillée barmaid from The Pig in a Poke that her small daughter's nervous system still baffled the doctor, and this sour-milk treatment might 'answer' or again it might not but what connection a nasty mess like that had with her being afraid of insects — well, it didn't seem feasible on the face of it. Miss Plowman, of the Post Office, speechless in lime-colour which clashed to excruciation with the *décor*, farmer Blue in broad-cloth, hair in a cowlick, and many others.

Alison regretfully abandoned the last step, was in the hall being greeted by Mr. Charming; then she selected a vantage-post, and having rescued the Prunes and Ridinghoods and the derelict Miss Plowman by the simple expedient of bringing them together and leaving them to talk quite naturally upon their own subjects — a move which had not so much as occurred to them, this being A Party — set herself to watching.

Down the great staircase, nodding and jovial, came the Baron in hunting pink, his seamed face creasing into smiles. Had he not married a daughter profitably and saved upon her keep, and would not the drinks to-night be plentiful and good — and free? And was he not prepared to suggest a spot of compensation to his host for abduction of a minor and enticement of a servant? His brain worked very fast indeed as he wrung Prince Charming's hand.

He was followed by his daughters: Thisbe portly in manly stock and dinner jacket, Clorinda, an Aubrey Beardsley in distraught hair and glazed chintz, her hollow eyes burning as she caressed the dead carnations on her shoulder.

(But . . . the creature's rather beautiful, too, Alison told herself.)

(If that woman's not a homosexual of some type, said Prince in her ear, I give up.)

(Um . . . You wait until she catches sight of you, hissed back Mrs. Beech.)

(No test. They frequently react very satisfactorily to matrimony.) He advanced, hand extended. And Alison was right; for on seeing him, her large eyes anchored in their haven, and almost those ravaged charms were smitten into their forgotten Spring.

(Don't give way one inch about anything!) Mrs. Beech drew aside.

But it was Thisbe, jaunty, proprietorial to a brother-in-law still permitted by the Table of Affinities, with whom he closed. For he gripped her hand in a clasp of agonizing iron, looked her squarely in the eye, and talked dumb.

'I'm mighty glad indeed to see you all
At what I fear may prove my farewell ball'

he remarked firmly. He had memorized that one while fixing his white tie in his dressing-room. And in that moment (but was one ever sure of anything, in this village?) he rather fancied that he had scored; for Thisbe recoiled, at a loss, her pale eyes mistrustful, apprehensive, with a hint of resentment. To that he was becoming

accustomed. But for the first time she helplessly muttered a definite reply in kind, before drawing aside and looking more alarmed than ever.

‘To come to-night we needed no persuasion,
This is indeed a very gay occasion.’

(But her face, he noted triumphantly, hardly suggested gaiety.) Alison, he saw, was working faithfully at the Baron, sweetly devilish in her condolence over the loss of his daughter ‘who as the youngest must have been the pet of you all’, at which the professional grin of that worthy was arrested, yet fixed still upon his face in a rather dreadful manner, though she observed that the flanges of his nose turned white . . . Then she turned to Clorinda. ‘And what a striking dress, Miss Clo,’ and waited. Clorinda said, deeply, ‘We wear them, you know, it’s always done. Glad it amuses you.’

Alison stood her ground. ‘“We”? You and your sister?’
‘Eh? Oh yes. It amuses people.’

‘Amuses? But, I see nothing “amusing” in your gown. *Artistic*, perhaps, but not amusing.’

She told Prince later that during the whole of a brief conversation, it seemed to her that Clorinda was answering from a triple personality: as the Baron’s daughter, of Daisydown: as the traditional figure of the middle, or theatre, phase of her evolution, unconscious of any self-betrayal, and as just a woman guest at any party; three elements, all trying to conform and merge and produce a normal being who mustn’t show a hurt, but smile through everything . . . it was not without its pathos. And she was extra-handicapped as a modern, living woman by her recent breakdown and nerve-storm, a thing which, as far as one knew, had had no place in the life of the other two Clorindas. . . .

Alison wavered. One isn’t brutal to a brainsick, lovesick fellow woman. At the same time, Clorinda, she was pretty sure, still stood, whether actually or traditionally, for some rather beastly things . . . and Prince must be safeguarded, and, somehow during this cycle of their interwoven histories, it was apparently up to one, Mrs. Beech, clergyman’s wife, to do it. ‘For one night only.’

To-morrow Prince would be safely on board at Southampton, homeward bound, his own man, to work and live and marry happily and sanely and suitably until death and his next cycle with the Baron and his daughters began. . . .

Clorinda answered with an unfamiliar kind of sureness, ‘Well, sometimes we dress to definite low-comedy, but personally I prefer the more subtle, feminine approach. I’ve made most of my biggest hits that way’ — she sketched a gesture at her Beardsley gown, demonstratively lifted a loop of the knee-length necklace of large sham emeralds, and shook enormous earrings that fell wellnigh to her lean shoulders.

Well . . . this was plain speaking with a vengeance! And yet (the social Clorinda) wasn’t the whole sentence compatible with normality? A woman who believed that sartorially she had a ‘style’ and stuck to it? And yet, Alison knew too much to be satisfied with that possibility. And then, putting a cigarette to her thin carmine lips, the Honourable Clorinda struck a match on the sole of her brocade shoe, matter-of-factly, successfully and tersely, as a man would. But — the hoyden that in spite of her years she was still known to be: And then she sighted Prince, and hesitated and flushed, patchily, and furtively threw down the cigarette and ground it out with flicked heel, as a woman does who fears the least disillusion of the beloved. . . .

Alison, considering her, gave it up. Thisbe, scenting antagonism, trundled forward and joined them. (*She has spunk, thought Alison, but I bet she was the worse of the two, at home.*) She turned to Thisbe. ‘I think the dancing will begin soon,’ then, sweetly, ‘We shall do our best — this time — to give you and Miss Clo a pleasant evening.’ Alison had gone, she knew, very near the verge, but if Clorinda could be ambiguous so could others. If the sisters recognized the hidden message in that sentence, could not an interpretation more permissible be also put upon it: ‘This time’ . . . for had not Prince’s ball been once postponed? But, as she told Prince, total disarmament very nearly set in, for the sisters, becoming modern guests (after all, they *were*), looked grateful and eager as might the habitual wallflowers at dances, and Clorinda said quite simply, ‘I’ve

never had a full programme, even in my first season, though I always go down well in the smoking-room', and Thisbe, robustly, 'I don't give a damn what happens if the supper's good' (*but was that enmity and suspicion, social pluck, or plain statement of truth? If the latter, it fitted everything one knew of her present incarnation*). Well, they were Prince's guests....

It was while her encounter with the sisters hung in the balance that, to the lilt of the music, an emollient influence descended the staircase, all smiles, a little mincingly — Queenie Good in her white, wearing the gilt sandal shoes and embellished by the bandeau (with star). Already in the doldrums once the impact of neighbours had been achieved and subduedly hailed, the waiting groups were stirred to interest, looking upwards at the white-clad figure so familiar to them all and from whose beneficent deeds and visits no cottage was safe. It almost seemed to the hypnotized Mrs. Beech that a decorous outbreak of applause would mark her arrival, and at one moment it looked to her as though Miss Good expected it too, for she glanced round gaily collecting eyes, but the moment passed and she was forced to take her place among the other guests, which she did with an extra-wide smile and sketched gesture of greeting that masked a possible discomfiture . . . (*And not one line shall she sing, vowed Alison, if I have to bribe the big drum*)..

As *Fame and Glory* approached its climax, a genuine stir was created, and even Mr. Charming's fancy flunkies, grinning, stood to facetious attention while down the staircase composedly trotted an enormous cat who paused on the last step (like a trained actor) and looked right and left. Tibbles was quite simply hunting for his Alison, had become unusually restless when she left the Vicarage and, accepting the inevitable, been let out by the maid, Marian, who supposed he wanted to mouse in the moonlight (or so she said) . . . and now, perfectly composed (as is an actor) before a crowd and lights and music, the great cat took his bearings while the massed guests watched and murmured their wonder and recognition and affection, and sighting Clorinda and Thisbe rapidly fleshed his claws upon the slender ankle of Clorinda, causing that person to cry aloud with pain, and while pursuing Mrs. Beech, rushed under

Thisbe's skirt and caused her to stumble before seating himself firmly by the Vicar's wife and beginning a strong selfconscious toilet (as cats do).

Upon the wave of released laughter and applause, and while the Baron's daughters hastily removed the traces of fury from their expressions, came a trickle of late arrivals: the Twankeys self-assured and debonair, the Princess Soshi in a sarong that fairly blazed with sequins and quite put those dotted about the white draperies of Miss Good in the shade, but of course dress is not everything, a Burmese-looking headdress of extreme complication and danglement framing her small tea-coloured face: Jack Durden sheepish in a new jacket and lamentable bow tie of pale blue (*but after all, he is a villager*, swiftly reflected Mrs. Beech), hurrying down to hide in the crowd but unable to escape an authentic round of applause and discreet backslapping from neighbours who liked him for his mother's sake, and possibly for his own, for all that is known to the contrary . . . And ere the applause had petered out, and even as the band grandiosely, sonorously thundered the measured finale of *Fame and Glory*, the last arrival appeared, the guest of honour, roguishly smiling, hand clapped to mouth at her own temerity.

Mrs. Durden, in full evening dress.

The music swelled, the applause picked up to be sustained by cheers led by Mr. Charming, and a competitive singing of For She's a Jolly Good Fellow, a 'Yoicks!' from Sir Francis Poynter, and cries of 'Speech!' from the Whittingtons. And as she gazed, the eyes of Alison Beech ridiculously stung.

In rich black velvet with matching handbag the size of a suitcase, in high, red-heel'd shoes to which her large feet had long been strangers, her jet-black curls springing in new turned corkscrews, Emma Durden had spared no expense. Her figure would never be other than spare and long-waisted and curveless, but prosperity (or some other agent) had somehow contrived to-night to give her an illusion of shape, though it was perhaps a pity that in her haste to dress for the party she should have mislaid her hair ornament and, after a little gibbering indecision, have replaced it with a shining tin jelly-mould. But really, thought Alison, between tears and laughter,

it looked wonderfully plausible. Not quite George Eliot, nor completely Emily Brontë, or Britannia in mourning, or yet conclusively Mrs. Vincent Crummles, Mrs. Durden descended, waving an enormous fan of — could it be possible? The old dear had a lifetime of ingenious contrivance behind her — blackleaded aspidistras (*and they'll probably become the rage in clever little shops off Oxford Street before we're through*, thought Mrs. Beech).

The music stopped.

Mr. Charming advanced and clasped the hand of Emma Durden, widow of this parish, in warm protectiveness, and kissed her cheek, at which in her bashful pleasure she twisted completely round and peeped at him over her shoulder, hand to mouth and shoulders shaking, then stepping forward, he brought out his most superlative effort in talking dumb (whatever happened, he'd be on board this time to-morrow).

'As slickly as the flight of any vulture
Your beans have grown, hail! queen of Agriculture',

he shouted.

It is possible that Queenie Good's motives in pushing forward at that moment were not, she being but human, completely dictated by congratulatory intent, but however that may be, Mrs. Durden had the last word, to the satisfaction of all.

'From wealth to victory you now shall step on
Without a fear — '

'I'm Hitler's Secret Weapon!' irrepressibly burst out of Mrs. Durden in reply, and hugging her aspidistras, laughed very heartily.

'My soul,' murmured Mr. Charming, rather appalled at what he appeared to have started, and wondering when and if it would stop.

'I shall die,' announced Mrs. Beech to Lady St. Cope, and as a corollary, 'and it'll be worth it.' Lady St. Cope raised her lorgnette and took a dispassionate survey. 'Very odd. I hardly like to suggest it, but that person in white . . . the champagne, you know . . . unaccustomed . . .' But Alison, with a loud hoarse crow of laughter, hid her face upon the elegant dowager's shoulder.

The ball opened with a Paul Jones — Alison's tip to her host. She knew the village, anticipated the tongues and eyes at work upon Mr. Charming's conferring of the first dance, but having got through the Paul Jones, and the ice well broken, he bowed before Lady St. Cope for the next dance, then booked Mrs. Durden for four and Alison herself for six and supper, arranged two more apiece with Clorinda and Thisbe, then hurried about seeing that their programmes were well filled for the rest of the evening. Admirable. And, as *The Greater Daisydown Gazette*, before it joined an advertisement of sheep-dip, put it on the following Saturday, a memorable occasion was had by all. It was an oversight for which he never quite forgave himself that Prince completely omitted Miss Good; there was even a time when, warbling sunnily to herself in token of unawareness, she nearly impelled the Vicar to ask her to sing, but at the instant she parted her lips to oblige, the band clashed and wailed and bonkē-tapped into *Red-hot Mamma is Turning Blue*. Alison, in the arms of Mr. Charming, saw, and became crippled once more. 'Hey?' he remonstrated mildly. Then, executing an adept and involved series of syncopated sidesteps, he commented, 'Looks like we're making it after all without much blood.' He was a beautiful dancer, if you had your health and kept your head when all about you were losing theirs and blaming it on you. Clorinda, Alison noticed, was also an admirable performer: she danced like a vamp and looked like one, while Thisbe jigged with a comic facetiousness either engrained or assumed to conceal deficiencies; the villagers, including Jack Durden, danced with religious correctness and melancholy and no grace at all, like most of their kind, and Mrs. Durden (particularly after supper) abandoned all pretence of having kept *au courant* with the latest steps, and exhibited a tendency to break from her partners and perform solo evolutions of a strange and sensational nature emphatically calculated to reveal the calico underwear. Unlike the late widow Twankey who laundered them, Mrs. Durden had not yet got round to silk or locknit.

The party had reached that point in most assemblies where it looked after itself, freeing Alison to look after her host. All told, she rescued him four times, three from Clorinda and once from — of all people — Miss Queenie Good, who suddenly appeared to realize for the first time in years it were beginning to be ungallant to hint at that she herself was still single. Thisbe was a straightforward matter of mere sleuthing and tactless intrusion on Mrs. Beech's part, and hasty, bogus messages. The wracked Clorinda gave more trouble, as she staged one Patrick-Campbellish scene after another, and fell into attitudes and kicked her fishtail train about, and generally speaking was hectic and haggard and greenery-yallery.

The music continued: crash, popular tune, pause, and *da capo* as the night wore on.

In one of the morning-rooms some villager was proposing at last to his young lady, a vision in pink (where he had become accustomed to a vision in blue): on the stairs fat stock was discussed with hock cup: on an upper landing, Tibbles was curtseying with nausea, he having consumed too many lobster patties: in the music-room, Lady St. Cope inspected her sleeping charge: in the hall itself, Mrs. Beech and the Vicar exchanged greetings, she not having glimpsed her husband since breakfast: in an alcove, Clorinda, in the absence of her mislaid host, kept her hand in on Mr. Charming's Italian assistant, who paid her profuse compliments that he forgot the next second, though she never. And in the billiards-room a row was in progress.

The Baron had drunk himself to crumpled truculence, and that smile his world knew so well was wiped from his seamed face. Across a sofa, Prince contemplated this specimen of local aristocracy, horn-rimmed glasses gleaming; his contempt was illimitable, his

bearing crisp, his remarks on the face of it as coming from host to guest, outrageous.

It appeared that the Baron valued his elder daughters and their alleged betrayed affections in a descending financial scale, beginning at a four-figure sum and ending in the settlement of the broker's men. The Cinderella affair rated cheaper but was a factor in the assessment; as for the Page, the Baron hinted at legal action but was prepared to consider an alternative recompense for lost services. And Charming listened, as he had listened a hundred times in his career to the ramblings of the nerve-sick and the disordered, with interest, patience, acumen and resource. And then he let fly.

It was a good speech: an immaculate summing-up of the discreditable, it should have shrivelled a sober man. For he remarked that the Baron was an undignified waster, a brainless blackmailer, a rotten father, that he had the makings in him of a first-rate sadist, a trait handed down in sufficient measure to his elder daughters to scotch their chances with any possible husband if he was half-way decent, and had: that if the Baron cared to take action he was at perfect liberty to do so and Prince thought it an excellent idea as giving himself and others in Daisydown a real and long-needed opportunity to show up the Hall, plus a possible reprieve from the stigma of relationship with its inmates: that he had reason to believe that the Page, Buttons, was working for no wages (this was deduction and guesswork) and under conditions that no Child Welfare association or Labour Union would suffer to continue for one second, and that if the Baron thought for one other second that he'd see one cent of the Charming money save as pensions for Honourable Clorinda and Thisbe and the redecoration of the Hall after their father's desirable demise, he had another guess coming. And finally, that if the Baron wanted to see the last of the broker's men — though God knew they were the most normal inmates of the Hall — it was up to him to get into some sort of shape physically and go land him a job of work if anyone in Daisydown would hand him one. 'I guess,' concluded Prince, 'you're still only in the middle sixties though you look seventy and more, and seems to me I've heard there's a war, and that means horses to tend an' choose, or feed to

contract for or grade and your Home Guard to volunteer into. Have at it! Make good before it's too late and you pass out of hobnailed liver and artereo-sclerosis; right now you've gotten a high percentage've the symptoms.'

It would be at about that point in Prince Charming's homily that he began to realize the havoc he was wreaking with the father of Cinderella. Drunk he might be and was, but his early bluster and menace had vanished at some unnoticed period and in an undefinable manner; as Prince was to tell Alison Beech, he himself began to lose touch with the man he was berating. It was as though, from trouncing a known bad neighbour, he was suddenly in the realm of the impersonal and inveighing at evil in the abstract, as the Baron's human personality dimmed. And as heat pulses in a red-hot iron, so the man reacted to various aspects of Prince's statements. He was, for instance, red and glowing — a person and a neighbour — before such considerations as blackmail and the general financial end, but wan — vulnerable — at hints of domestic dis-ease at the Hall, until Prince admitted that he thought the fellow would dissolve into nothing and leave an empty chair. Yet, something of the reason came to Prince: that the Baron's subconscious memory was at work, informing him that Prince knew his story, and the sorry rôle in fact and legend and fact again that he must perpetually re-enact, of vile father disguised as jovial good sport, through all eternity, never to be quite human or yet entirely symbol . . . And the chap was looking — whatever he was — quite desperately ill.

There was no clock in the room, and Prince acted upon an impulse that he has never quite understood. Glancing at his wrist-watch, he made a dart for the great pedestal wireless and turned a knob.

A pause, then through all The Palace came the clangour of Big Ben striking twelve.

Into the face of the Baron some life returned, as one deafening beat succeeded another and Prince deliberately resuscitated his memory of that ancient landmark in his story, the turning-point when his daughter, flying the house in rags, ran back to his home, there to be rescued by Prince's namesake for the rest of her happy life.

Nine — ten — eleven. Sweat glistened on the Baron's face.

Twelve. And he wiped his forehead and rose.

'She's gone again,' he said, and took a breath. 'Until next time.'

'Yes, Baron. And now you're free to be decent — until next time,' and Prince patted the shoulder, half in sympathy, half in congratulation, of his traditional foe at the dawn of their traditional armistice.

VII

The striking of Big Ben was audible even in the ballroom. From the arms of her partner the eyes of Thisbe met and held the eyes of Clorinda in the arms of hers . . . relief . . . enquiry . . . defeat, and the old struggle to recall the reason for that glance.

Tibbles, recovered, thudded downstairs to find and nudge his Alison, who stooped to him and whispered that all was well.

Mrs. Durden's suspender snapped with a report like a pistol, causing her to shout that it was no good feeling down and she could at least keep her spirits up, and that Providence suited the Jack to the Durden.

It was the irreproachable Miss Good who, ere the last stroke had died away, halted, looked dazed, advanced to the centre of the ballroom, and parted her lips to speak. But no words came. It was agreed later, in morning shopping gossip, that she seemed at a loss, looked about as though searching for something or someone. And presently the radio started another programme, and Queenie Good, still looking a little dazed, gave place to the dancers. It was, indeed, she who left at midnight, having decided that she wasn't having a very good time.

At four o'clock the guests formed rank and the band played The National Anthem while the entire company waved silk Union Jacks and the Stars and Stripes, favours by their places at the supper tables. They thronged round Prince in thanks, farewell and good-bye: not one but grasped his hand and wished him luck and safety from submarines, and with charming gallantry he kissed the elder women and the hand of Lady St. Cope while frankly hugging

Mrs. Durden. The invalid chair of the sleeping Miss St. Cope he bent over, gently touching her forehead with his lips, as the electric festoons swayed in the night air, and the outer darkness was pricked by the torches of those returning home in the black-out.

S C E N E I 3

I

THE luggage bestowed in his state-room, Prince put both arms round Alison and gave her the sort of kiss a brother might who was rather untypically fond of his sister, then handed her a cheque for fifty pounds.

She supposed it was for the church, and said so, but Prince answered quite simply that he'd already come across with a hundred for Reverend Beech. 'That fifty is for cables,' he announced, 'I shall want the news: I'll send more when it's gone.'

II

But after all the first cable came from him:

Cinderella and Earle married stop nice apartment near Columbus Circle stop Buttons acting valet stop love Prince.

To which she replied:

Hope family pleased nothing much here Clorinda a land girl amazing in jodhpurs baron hunting job hopes success through influence whittingtons.

And two days later:

Great news miss st cope woken up aunt says did so on way from dance stop please account.

He answered by return:

Kissed her stop warn aunt go easy on all men for period at least six months or girl may crash stop.

She cabled:

Aunt says why? Alison.

He replied:

Never start rusty car on top gear stop.

Then, over the weeks:

Cinderella in pictures stop tests fine stop am riled stop
insist changes name stop studio considering Cinda Ash or Cella
Fair stop.

She answered:

Warmest wishes what fun. Alison.

But it was Alison in her unassuming village who, in the joyful admission of Prince, scored top marks in the news transmission. For in the Spring of the following year the Government, headed by The Ministry of Crops, and abetted by a bevy of those anonymous persons whose privilege it is to log-roll for those completely unknown to them, published the name of Mrs. Durden in the Birthday Honours (for services to agriculture) and she became a Dame of the British Empire. The village was delighted, though it is constitutionally unable to get her or any other title correctly, and Dame Emina will eternally be referred to as 'Dame Durden'.

That was the end of the excitement, if one discounts Prince Charming's cable which came three months later:

Cinderella's preview flop stop can't groom to stardom stop
these dumb blondes never higher than supports stop.

And, in the summer:

Earle father eight pound girl stop guess some member of
our family for it again stop am returning Daisydown in fall
stop please get palace in shape stop all love Prince stop.

CURTAIN

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